

WOW: BURNING CRUSADE

EMPIRE EARTH 3

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AUTHORITY

APRIL '07



Games for Windows[®]

ISSUE 05 \ APRIL 2007 \ THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

SPECIAL REPORT
GAMING LOVE AND HATE
THE WORLD'S TOP GAME DEVELOPERS SOUND OFF ON THE GOOD AND BAD OF THEIR DREAM JOBS

REVIEWED
SUPREME COMMANDER
PLUS: GAS POWERED GAMES' CHRIS TAYLOR SPEAKS OUT!

MURDER INC.
CONFESSIONS OF AN ONLINE HIT MAN
GETTIN' PAID TO GRIEF GAMERS LIKE YOU!

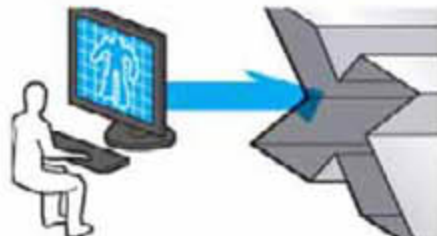
SINGLE-PLAYER REVEALED
UNREAL TOURNAMENT 3
GEARS OF WAR WAS JUST A WARM-UP ACT!



PREVIEWED
SILENT HUNTER: WOLVES OF THE PACIFIC
SUBMARINE SIM SEQUEL



REVIEWED
WORLD OF WARCRAFT: BURNING CRUSADE
FEED YOUR ADDICTION



TECH
FUTURE OF GAMING
5 TECHNOLOGIES THAT WILL CHANGE THE WAY YOU PLAY

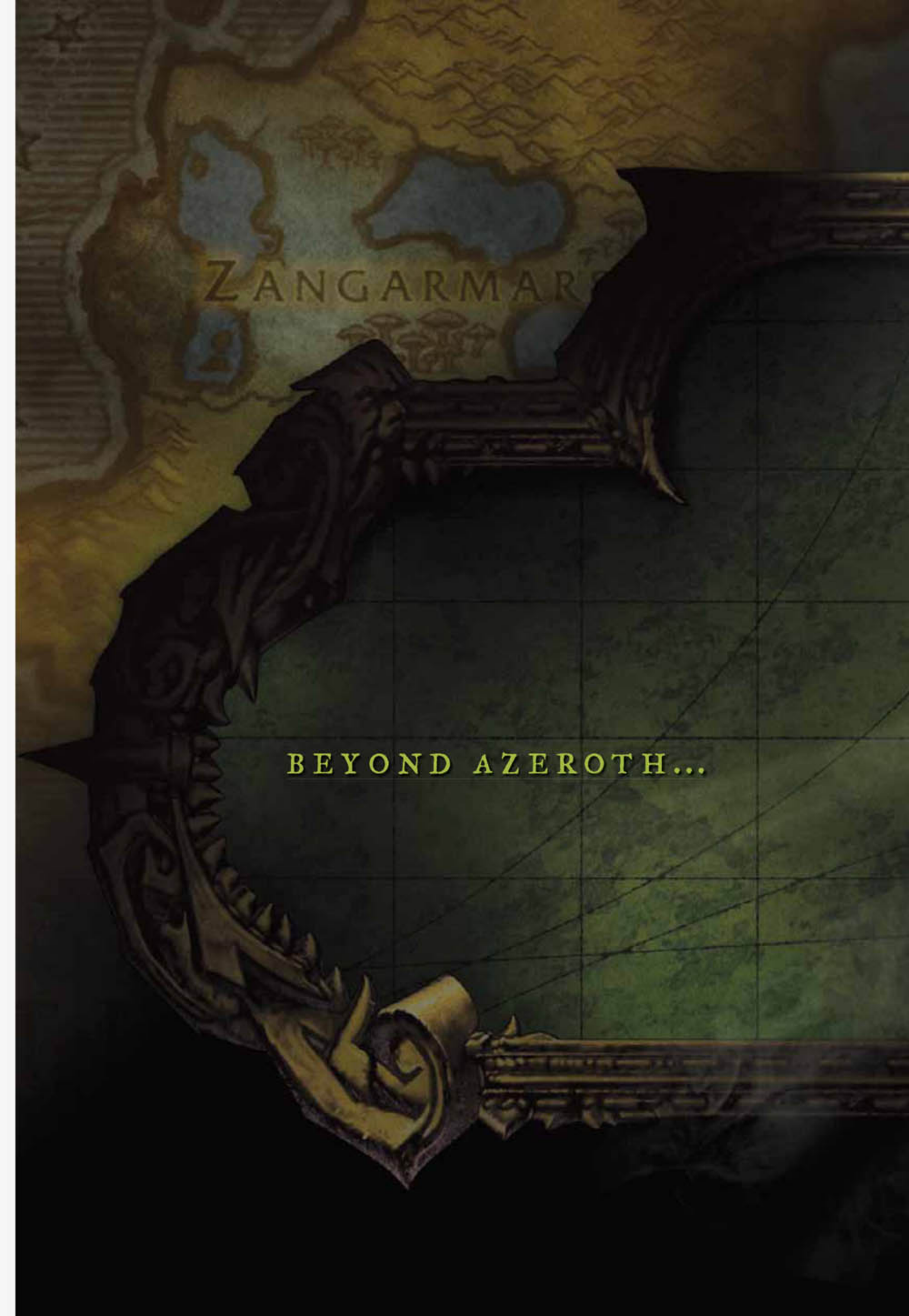
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A map of Zangarmarsh is shown on a parchment-like background. The map features several blue bodies of water and green landmasses. The word "ZANGARMARSH" is written across the map in a stylized, serif font. In the foreground, a large, ornate key is positioned diagonally. The key has a complex, multi-lobed head with intricate carvings and a long, straight shaft. The key is rendered in a dark, metallic color with some highlights. The background behind the key is a dark, grid-like pattern, possibly representing a floor or a map grid.

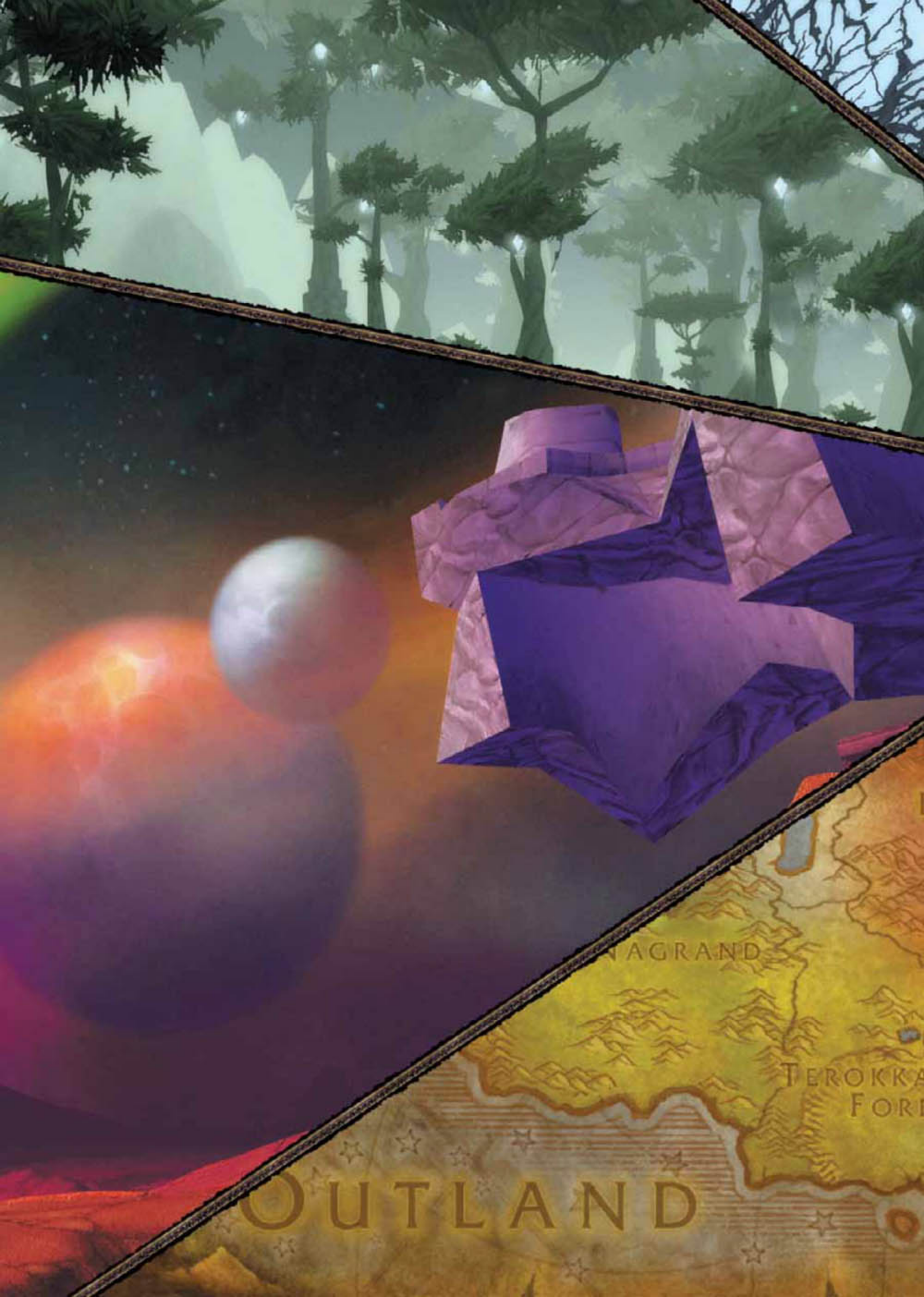
ZANGARMARSH

BEYOND AZEROTH...



TEEN	
T	Blood Suggestive Themes Use of Alcohol Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING	www.esrb.org

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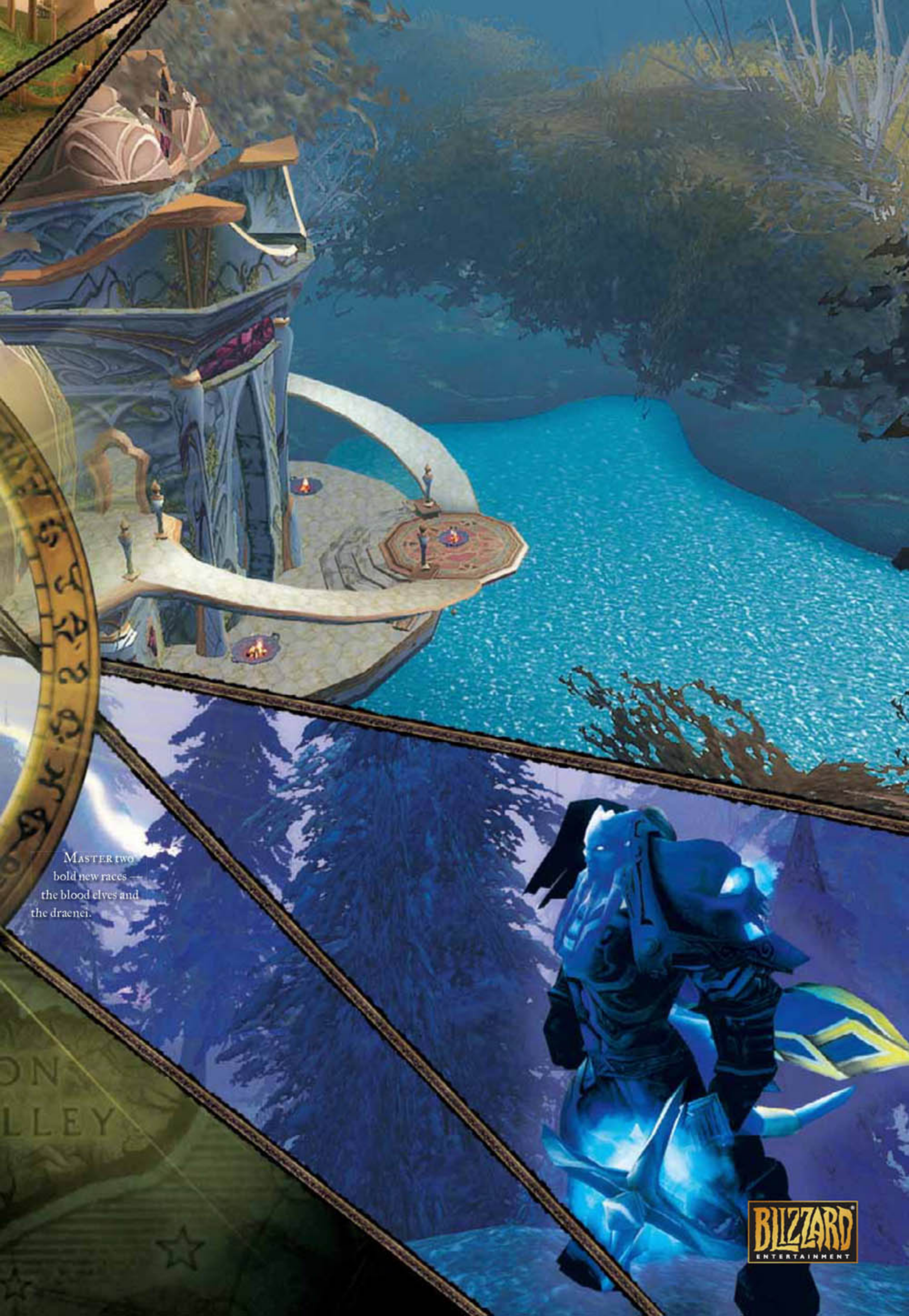
A NEW
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HELLFIRE
PENINSULA

WEST

WORLD
WARCRAFT
THE BURNING CRUSADE

IN STORES NOW



MASTER TWO
bold new races —
the blood elves and
the draenei.

ON
LLEY





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If you're reading this, you may already be a winner



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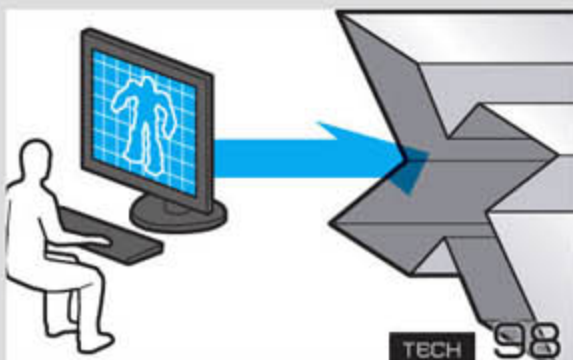
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THIS MONTH ON GFWOS.1UP.COM

Watch the Feb. 26 episode of the 1UP Show for more *Unreal Tournament 3*. Also: Our 7 pages of *The Burning Crusade* coverage not enough for you? Look for the epic *Legendary Thread* podcast and blog online.



XTRAS

PAGING HIRO

No, honey, I still don't have time to do the dishes!



I wish I were Hiro. Seriously. It's the only solution to my current gaming problem. (And if you don't know who Hiro is, then please drop this magazine immediately and go set your TiVo to start catching episodes of NBC's splendid superhero TV show *Heroes*, or I will be forced to revoke your Geek Card.) Hiro, ya see, can stop time. And with the pile of new games and recent games and games about to come out all staring me in the face, I simply have no clue how I will get through all of it. *Please, Hiro, teach me your powers!*

This month, for example, I spent many, many waking hours making my way through two outstanding new expansion packs: Iron Lore's *Titan Quest: Immortal Throne*, the good 'n' meaty follow-up to the best action-RPG of 2006 (see review page 75), and Blizzard's phenomenal *Burning Crusade*, which needs no introduction here (see review page 72). These two games alone kept me up ridiculously late, made me lie to my family (yeah, sure, I was "too busy" to go shopping with them), and basically put anything constructive I might have done with my free time (like volunteering at a homeless shelter) on the back burner for yet another month. Even worse, these two games were just barely the tip of the iceberg in terms of new stuff I wanted to play. *Vanguard*, *Supreme Commander*, and *Europa Universalis III* are all beckoning me in their sweet, seductive ways. And then there are all the great games already sitting unfinished on my hard disk, such as *Company of Heroes* and *Age of Empires III: The WarChiefs*, and, um, *Baldur's Gate II*, all shoved aside for the newer, shinier toys that keep showing up day after day after day.

I know. Cue the violins. Well, you can mock me or scorn me or tell me to stop whining if you wish, but I'm still telling you: I need to stop time. I need to be Hiro. Ordinary human existence is no longer enough to handle all of this.

And, hey, as long as I'm pimping a TV show, let me do the same for a radio show: GFW Radio, to be exact, our mighty, fantabulous weekly podcast, now setting gamers' eardrums ablaze at GFWRadio.1UP.com and at the iTunes Music Store. You haven't really lived until you've heard five grown men arguing about whether Blood Elves are hotter than Night Elves. Join the "fun"!

Jeff Green

Editor-in-Chief

Games for Windows: The Official Magazine

Now Playing: *Titan Quest: Immortal Throne*; *WOW: The Burning Crusade*; *Hotel Dusk: Room 215* (Nintendo DS)

1UP.com Blog: GFWJeff.1UP.com

MEET THE STAFF



SEAN MOLLOY
MANAGING EDITOR

If it weren't for all that meting out justice while out on jury duty, Sean would have played *The Burning Crusade* nonstop.

Now Playing: *World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade*
1UP.com Blog: GFWSean.1UP.com



DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR (FEATURES/TECH)

Darren is a sad panda this month. While he is digging some stuff in Vista, he can't play some of his favorite indie games anymore.

Now Playing: *World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade*, *Hotel Dusk: Room 215* (DS)
1UP.com Blog: GFWDarren.1UP.com



RYAN SCOTT
EDITOR (REVIEWS/EXTEND)

Even Ryan—the biggest *World of Warcraft* hater in the office—is playing *The Burning Crusade*. The surprising part: He's actually enjoying it!

Now Playing: *World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade*
1UP.com Blog: GFWRyan.1UP.com



SHAWN ELLIOTT
EDITOR (START)

Vista: check. DirectX 10 compatible videocard: check. *Crysis*: where is it already?

Now Playing: *Company of Heroes*, *Microsoft Flight Simulator X*, *Crysis demo*
1UP.com Blog: GFWShawn.1UP.com



MICHAEL JENNINGS
ART DIRECTOR

After seeing all the kick-ass game art sent in this month Michael has a word for folks who say this will be a slow year for games: "Wrong!"

Now Playing: *Call of Duty 2*
1UP.com Blog: GFWMichael.1UP.com



ROSEMARY PINKHAM
JUNIOR DESIGNER

Uh-oh! Rosie's Nintendo DS is running way low on batteries. Will she finally succumb to the temptations of *World of Warcraft*? Will the GFW gang give Rosie back her DS charger?

Now Playing: It all depends on if these nerds ever give me back my charger!
1UP.com Blog: GFWRosie.1UP.com

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Contact anyone on this masthead via e-mail using
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Letters

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LETTER OF THE MONTH

A MISSING YEAR

It's great to see the "Games of the Year" issue is back (*GFW #4*, pg. 57). Even though it was a smaller-than-usual "Games of the Year" issue than in the past. And I'm also guessing that the "new" management forced you to do a "Games of the Year" issue.

Adam Ruhoff

Firstly, excellent job of sucking out any gratification we might have gleaned from your initial compliment. Nicely done.

Secondly, we wish Bill Gates had come in and told us to do a "GOTY" feature; that would have ruled and been far more interesting than what really happened, which was that—and we can say this now, because *CGW* is gone—we just kinda forgot to do one last year. Oh, we had plans. And they were, we assure you, great plans. But then, yeah, we forgot about them.



• Would Sid Meier's *Civilization IV* have been our 2005 Game of the Year? We don't remember!

SERVING THE ILLUSORY METAREADER

I was saddened to read your review philosophy in the latest issue (*GFW #4*, pg. 75), where you describe how you assume what our interests are when you decide what to cover. I'm certainly not just interested in the latest triple-A MMO/FPS/RTS/RPG, and I know plenty of other gamers with broad interests. (And I can read about those marquee games anywhere.)

You could have assumed, for instance, that I'd never care for a casual game, but without your unexpected coverage of *Bonnie's Bookstore*—one of your games of the year—I might have missed that fun title. I think you're projecting your own interests on others by assuming that hardcore gamers don't care much about "baby games," Christian games, casual games, indie games, sims, war games, and other genres you tend to downplay or cover only in passing with postcard-sized columns or tiny reviews. And after all, maybe more gamers would be into these things if more gamers heard about them and you showed more enthusiasm for them with equal coverage.

Isn't part of your job to expose us to new games and genres and trends, whatever they might be? By all means, help us decide what's worth our time or not, but please, don't just decide in advance to keep silent about something. We might never even hear of it.

Samhain

It's at the heart of our job to "decide in advance to keep silent about something." In a book with a fixed page count, how much space a game gets—three pages, eight pages, zero pages, a postage-stamp-sized corner of a page—is a

statement in and of itself about that game. To make this decision, we have to mentally ball up our entire diverse readership into a single, fictional metareader: a cold, unliving paradox that simultaneously loves and hates *World of Warcraft*, constantly sometimes never plays *Bookworm*, and lives in a basement mansion with 1,539 children and some sort of nauseating parrot-cat-ferret hybrid.

Exposing readers to new games and genres is great when it's warranted—and when we do decide to dole out space to a game or genre that this illusory metareader wouldn't normally be interested in (*Bonnie's Bookstore*, for example), that means we think it's well worth your time. We decided that *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* (the game we were talking about when we wrote that editorial) wouldn't be.

HEARD ON THE RADIO

I wanna just thank you guys for not censoring your decidedly lukewarm reaction to Vista (*GFW Radio*, 1/31/2007, GFWRadio.1UP.com). I'll admit, I was a bit afraid the pressure from executives rich enough to have you erased from all recorded history would cause you to censor yourselves, but when the EIC of *Games for Windows: The Official Magazine*



• Listen to the *GFW* crew gab outside the pages of the magazine at podcasts.1UP.com.

won't install a free copy of Vista...let's just say the prodigiousness of your collective n**sack shall ne'er be questioned.

I still agree with Jeff's initial sentiment at *CGW*'s relaunch: It's the ease of use and connectivity in Vista that will really push PC gaming, and it's just not there yet. The hardcore will always snub their noses at the idea that improved ease of use constitutes innovation, but everything from the iPod to *WOW* proves the contrary; let's hope Microsoft at least makes good on rectifying the embarrassment that the current ideal online environment is a console one.

Personally, I'm one of the traitorous legions on a MacBook Pro, but I still love getting *GFW* on a monthly basis. I do have a copy of *XP* that's been sitting on my shelf for a month, yearning for dual-boot, but the day that I need more gaming than the combined forces of *WOW* and *Civilization 4* can provide will be...what's *Hellgate's* launch date again?

Marcus

WATCHING VS. PLAYING

In your article "Why Do Videogame Stories Suck?" (*GFW #3*, pg. 26), Orson Scott Card commented that "cut-scenes interrupt the narrative flow" of



gameplay and make players feel as though they have lost independence or freedom in the game. I would simply like to state that not all gamers feel the same way as Mr. Card. Cut-scenes give game developers a chance to show off their nifty graphics (I have observed that the aesthetic gap between cut-scene and in-game graphics is frequently noticeable) and, lacking fluent in-game story development, a chance to expand on the plot, characters, and so on. Personally, production skill providing, I would be more than content to sit and watch a story developed through stunning visuals over a long interval of not playing rather than the same story be explained with less finesse in-game (i.e., as a result of my character's actions).

Mike J

For us (and presumably Mr. Card), the "aesthetic gap" you mention is, in fact, one of the prime culprits in breaking immersion. Nothing announces "YOU'RE NOT PLAYING A GAME NOW" more than a prerendered cinematic that bears no resemblance to what you were just shuffling around on the screen. Games are still developing their own language, according to really smart videogame professors—so right now, games borrow a lot from movies. For now, we point to *Half-Life 2* as a paragon (see, we're smart, too) of how to handle interactive narrative. More of that, please. >

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BEST CORRECTION EVER

Just FYI, the guy you shoot off the banister in *Mad Dog McCree* falls on the ground, not in a horse trough.

Jerec



DOUBLE STANDARDS

If playing games is spending your life staring at colored lights and dicking a button, what about watching movies? You don't even click while watching movies. Is reading books spending your life staring at ink-printed paper doing nothing as well?

Only the select few who heed the higher calling play games, rid the evils, right the wrongs, or fight the aliens planning to invade. That's why I often answer cynics asking me why I game with, "Who else, if not me?"

True to the teaching of Descartes—"I game, therefore I am"—I rest my case.

James Lam

What's most baffling is that people think it's perfectly acceptable to get drunk, strip down to your underwear, and cheer loudly at football players in a stadium, but that it is not perfectly acceptable to get drunk, strip down to your underwear, and play *Leisure Suit Larry* in the dark. What a world.

WHAT WOULD GABRIEL DO?



In *GFW* #3, reviewer Jenn Frank makes the claim "...a throwaway supermarket-novel plot seemingly meant for a *Gabriel Knight* game..." in regard to *Secret Files: Tunguska*. Now, if I remember correctly, the *Gabriel Knight* games were some of the most popular games during Sierra On-Line's heyday, and for good reason. Even *Gabriel Knight 3* had a deep, interesting plot, filled with detailed backstories, regardless of the horrible puzzles (cat pee helps in the creation of a fake moustache?) and awkward

gameplay. As a huge fan of the series, I would love to know what was going through Jenn Frank's head when she was writing this.

Steve F.

We assume she didn't really intend to sound churlish or dismissive of the greatest adventure-game series ever, but rather than try and read her mind, we went and asked Jenn what was going through her head:

"At that very instant, I was actually thinking about how much I'd like to be rereading Jane Jensen's own novelization of *Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Father* on the toilet again. But in the sentence you cite, I don't really intend to sound churlish or dismissive of the greatest adventure-game series ever. I guess I meant to say 'pulpy espionage and intrigue, now in paperback.'"

CITY OF CORRECTIONS

I'm writing this to inform you of a serious piece of misinformation in your February issue (*GFW* #3). In the Crisis on Infinite Servers column, it was complained that *City of Heroes'* greatest fault was that you couldn't



• Not useful in this scenario: Cham Bunny, Invoke Dewey Decimal System, Gil Toss.

go back and make changes to your hero to fix a bad power selection. Well...you can. It's called a respec, and you can get at least three of them that I'm aware of; plus, anytime a major patch is released (called a new issue), all heroes receive a free one. The normal three are obtained by completing a (relatively) short Task Force. They allow you to completely reselect your powers and place enhancement slots one at a time, just as though you had received them from leveling up. As a bonus, it lets you reassign your enhancements, and any you don't place get a full-price refund. If used cleverly, you can get a giant refund to help you pay for the next tier of enhancements, thus saving a fortune!

Jason DeWittie

You're actually not the only one who wrote us about this, so it bears addressing. Our writer definitely knows (and knew) that respecs exist—he and *GFW* reviews editor Ryan Scott were big *COH* geeks when it first launched. The problem the writer was alluding to is that there's no convenient way to fix broken characters without jumping through a bunch of hoops; his exact complaint in the article was "not having an easy way to fix a mistake under these circumstances." Yes, you can run through the respec missions or wait for a content update to get a freebie respec, but there's no convenient way to tweak your character's power selection—these two options are the *only* options. Perhaps we should have put emphasis on the word "easy" when we edited

the article; in any case, we're sorry it came across as an erroneous statement, as that is not what we—or the writer—intended.

VIRTUAL REALTY

Regarding your article "Play for Pay" (*GFW* #3, pg. 40): I spent many an hour in glorious rapture playing several MMORPGs over three to five years where I made a boatload of cash selling valuable items and gold on eBay. In my estimation, I would say that I raked in a total of about \$50,000 over three years of playing *Ultima Online*, *Asheron's Call*, and *Dark Age of Camelot*. Most of that came from selling blocks of gold coins via sales from strategically placed houses in *Ultima Online*. Other "opportunities" arose with loose-mouthed developers divulging certain items that were about to be "nerfed," allowing for opportunistic gaming capitalists like myself to load up ahead of time and slowly dole out the sales for months afterward. The occasional exploit that popped up also provided more stuffins for my coin purse. It was a great ride, but life interposed in the form of kids and a loving wife, so those days are long gone. Not to mention the Chinese gold farmers that spew megaspam during *WOW* game sessions for pennies-an-hour wages.

Ekote

Let this serve as a cautionary tale: If what we discuss in this month's Crisis on Infinite Servers column (pg. 89) comes to pass, this letter here could probably be used in court as evidence of insider trading, fraud, and tax evasion.

CONVENIENT HALF-TRUTHS

Shortly after watching *An Inconvenient Truth*, I've gotten the urge to do something about this whole global-warming issue (and I don't want to see Al Gore anymore). Plus, why not cut down on my electricity bill while I'm at it? How about you guys at *GFW* tell us how to cut down on our electricity while still maintaining a solid fps rate?

Just focus on saving power when you're not playing. Crank up all of Windows' built-in power-management tools. Turn off your monitor when you walk away from your PC, or if you're *really* concerned, turn off your PC when you're not using it. Science fact: a sleeping PC still uses more energy than one that's off.

ONE FINAL CORRECTION

In the February issue's Vista preview, we said that the Experience Index score remains static—and that over time, a game's rating gets adjusted. While that might have been the case at one point, that isn't how it works in the final version of Vista. Right now, the scale goes up to "5.9" and as new hardware comes out, the scale will just keep getting higher. So, theoretically, *Crysis* could rate a "10" requirement when it ships.

We <3 mail! Write us at gfwletters@ziffdavis.com.

MAIL BYTES

When Jeff Green plays *Clue*, does he play as himself or as someone else?

Lorenzo Sendra

Is the Freeloader even a real person, or just a shadow of his former self? This has to be one of the greatest mysteries of our time! Enlighten me!

Joel Murphy

This mag is awesome! The first time I picked up this mag, I thought it was an Xbox mag!

Hurricane Ralf



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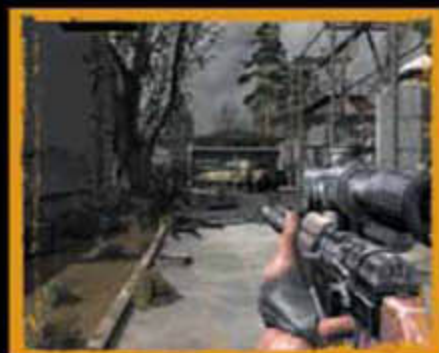
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CULTURE

Confessions of an Electronic Hit Man

Getting paid to piss you off online.

22



PREVIEW

Empire Earth III

The lunatic RTS reigns it in...a little.

30



PREVIEW

Silent Hunter: Wolves of the Pacific

Submarine sim sequel!

42



• According to producer Ted Morris, "the scope is big and the units are huge. Destruction takes place on a sliding scale of tactical skirmishes, from 'superweapons' that obliterate a huge chunk of the playable map to 'megaweapons' that obliterate the entire territory."

UNIVERSE AT WAR: EARTH ASSAULT

Conquering the world

PUBLISHER: Sega DEVELOPER: Petroglyph GENRE: MMO Real-Time Strategy RELEASE DATE: Fall 2007

PREVIEW

➔ When a game's fiction centers around threats extraterrestrial, you can generally rest assured of one thing: You're about to tackle some of the most generic bad guys an unimaginative game designer can conjure up. Sci-fi real-time strategy games get it the worst; if the half-baked shovelware strategy epic you just booted up isn't trying as hard as it can to copy *StarCraft*, chances are high that whatever villains you're up against look like they just walked out of a *Star Trek/Doctor Who* crossover—with a formulaic world-domination agenda to match. So, when faced with the same damn "aliens invade!" shtick and a generic name like *Universe at War: Earth Assault*, why should you expect *this* RTS to be any different?

UAW producer Ted Morris sums it up nicely. "We're huge fans of the MMORPG genre, and we've reengineered some of the features that make those games so fun and impactful into *Universe at War*." You heard the man right: It's a *massively multiplayer online* RTS—from Petroglyph, the studio responsible for last year's *Star Wars: Empire at War*.

Though the concept looks good on paper, it doesn't take long to realize that most MMORPG conventions don't exactly lend themselves to RTS gameplay. Character development and advancement, for instance—a subject that *Age of Empires III* tackled in greater detail—suddenly becomes something that goes far beyond where your name appears on the online leaderboard. "You'll have ways to advance the traits or special abilities of your online persona and use those improvements in later games against your foes—or in conjunction with a friend against another team," says Morris. "We have an online mode called 'Conquer the World.' Players start with one territory and then attempt to conquer the rest of the globe through online battles. Your progression is gauged by how much of the Earth you own and how much still needs to be conquered. Conquering the entire planet gives players bragging rights—our substitution for standard 'MMORPG gear.'" Morris also

points out that *UAW* allows a high level of customization that "transcends both single- and multi-player games," comparing it to how you'd trick out a favorite *World of Warcraft* avatar—but it's too early to talk specifics.

JUST THE BEGINNING

In any case, that still doesn't assuage our fears of a stereotypical sci-fi scenario. *UAW*'s bullet points tout three unique factions, galaxywide wars, and destructible environments—the usual suspects. But, according to design director Adam Isgreen, the structure isn't as banal as our knee-jerk reaction suggests. "We don't believe in making one-off games," Isgreen explains. "We like creating worlds that we enjoy returning to, exploring, and expanding. This game tells a very epic story that sets greater events in motion. The initial release is where it all starts—the approach we're taking to telling the first game's story is more like a season of a great TV show than just a 'game story.' Our story arcs happen within individual missions, over several missions, over one faction's entire campaign, over multiple campaigns, and even into the future of the franchise. Everything that happens has some impact into the future, and we've been very careful to make sure that we're answering lots of questions, and leaving more open as the series continues."

"And we're not on future-Earth, or some version of Earth you can't relate to," Isgreen continues. "We're in the year 2012 at the start, so we have a lot of very recognizable locations, peoples, and political situations. People still don't get along, oil is still an issue, and although some amazing and catastrophic things have happened in our version, it's still the same planet. We leverage this throughout the story, especially as you learn more about our factions and how they relate to each other and to the planet itself."

SATELLITE OFFICE

The big, nasty alien faction calls itself the Hierarchy and relies on mobile war machines to do the dirty work. Everything about the Hierarchy—unit production, tech upgrades, >

“THE APPROACH WE'RE TAKING TO TELLING THE FIRST GAME'S STORY IS MORE LIKE A SEASON OF A GREAT TV SHOW THAN JUST A 'GAME STORY.'”

—ADAM ISGREEN, DESIGN DIRECTOR, *UNIVERSE AT WAR*



• "UAW uses an updated version of *Empire at War's* Alamo graphics engine so that we can have higher-detailed models, better animation, and DirectX 10 support," says Morris.



• "As much as possible, we want the interface out of the way of gameplay," says Morris. "We're taking much of the clutter away and leaving you with a largely unobstructed window to command your forces."

defenses, and special abilities—revolves around these massive structures, and the idea of controlling an army with this type of universal portability is something that lead designer Steve Copeland says that "no other factions—or games—have." Speaking to the faction balance in general, Copeland says that, "The rock-paper-scissors model—or some abstraction of it—is fundamental to all good RTS games. Advanced gameplay is about giving just enough attention to a situation to ensure the ends you desire, then moving on to spend your attention elsewhere in the battle. In order to do this, there has to be a certain amount of predictability to any encounter—rock beats scissors." Hey, if it ain't broke....

UAW does tinker with plenty of tactical standards, though, dividing gameplay into strategic

and global modes. The former allows you to make big-picture decisions—attack plans, strike-force management (these squads consist of hero units and persistent-state troops), espionage, and command-center construction. The global mode takes a page from *Empire at War's* galactic conquest mode—with a few improvements. "Turning all the data on led to information overload, and managing numerous fleets was difficult," says Isgreen. "Keeping track of which planets had what upgrades also became an issue. Although you could attack from different vectors, it didn't offer much of an advantage. We wanted to simplify and improve on [these things] in UAW. We redefined and gave impact to what it means to attack from a different direction; coming into an enemy ter-

ritory can set off territorial defenses, pelting your incoming assault craft as they move toward the combat area. If they take too much damage, they'll be shot down. If you attack from a different vector where you don't have to cross as much open terrain to reach the combat location, you take less risk. Once in combat, your [plan of attack] defines where you appear. If you used your spies well, you might be behind the enemy's defenses. This is just one example of how we've applied lessons from our previous title into UAW's global mode." And for *Supreme Commander* fans who smell a rip-off, Isgreen says it ain't so: "I don't think anyone will look at the respective games and think the respective developers set out to make the same kind of product." • Ryan Scott

STRATEGY ON A GALACTIC SCALE



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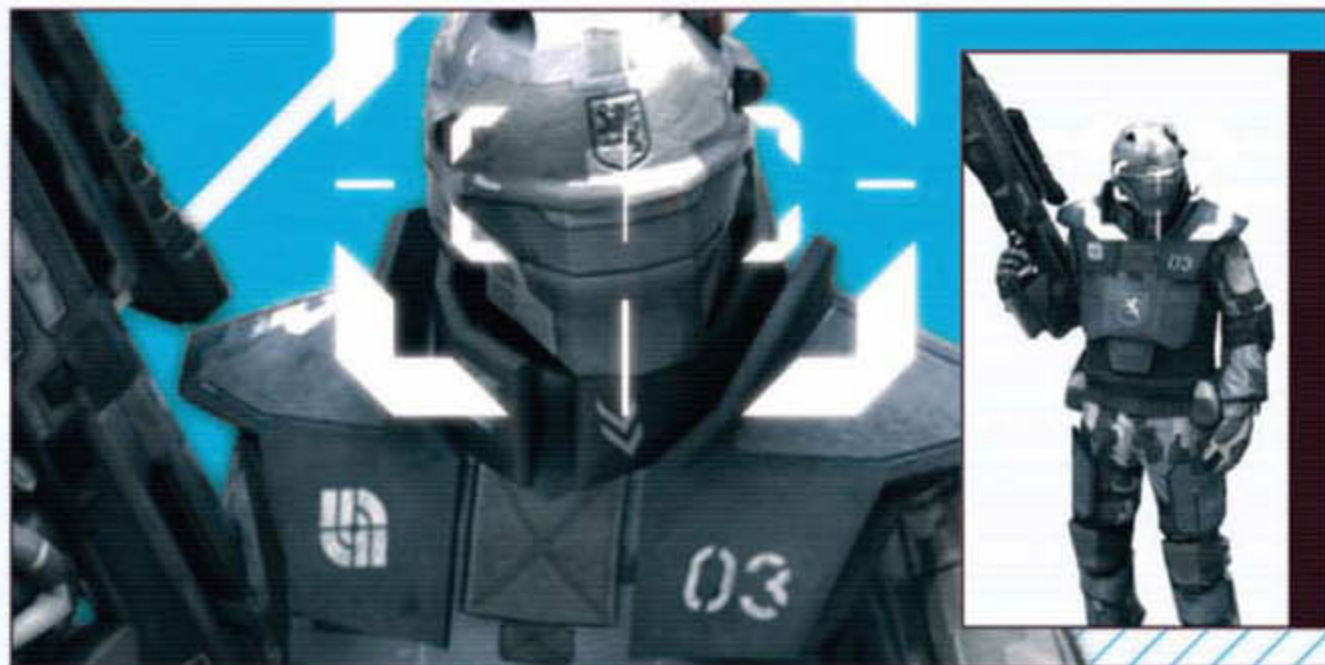
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BACKGROUND

PLAY STYLE

ACCEPT CO

YES

CONFESSIONS OF AN

Making money making you miserable

CULTURE

You buckle up; he ferries you out of bounds. You steady, aim, and fire; he steps in front of your (friendly) sights. Yes, professional provocateur "Silkenbow" is stoking your rage; no, it's nothing personal.

"[Shock rocker] Alice Cooper's song 'Gimme' is my anthem," says this multiplayer Mephisto. "Someone feels overlooked, ripped off, and mad that his skills can't match those of the people he's fighting. I side with him, tell him that he's so right, and say how well he'd play if only those nasty cheaters weren't cheating. And I have a solution: If he pays up, I'll help handle the payback."

Get this straight: Your grief is Silkenbow's gain, provided a third party coughs up the actual money for his virtual mischief.

Sometimes, you're one man's nemesis and never know it. More often, it's a confederation of players splitting the payment. "Since no one person ponies up much money on his own, groups give me my best business," Silkenbow says. "It works well for people who know one another and want to snub a specific team or person without running the risk of being banned themselves."

Skeptical? So are we, but then Internet Gaming Entertainment Ltd., which operates a network of buying and selling sites for MMO currency and assets, is lucrative enough to maintain offices in Los Angeles, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Seoul. And, well, if someone somewhere is blowing \$799.99 on a level 60 Tauren, what's another \$20 to bury a *Battlefield* vendetta? Silkenbow floats fees from \$2 to \$20 a hit (more if a client demands he badger a mark for an entire evening) and claims

he sometimes makes \$200 or more a month accepting PayPal and personal checks.

AGENT OF RIGHTEOUS RETRIBUTION?

Silkenbow, who asks that his real name not appear in print, sought "odd jobs" in the *Tribes* and *Unreal Tournament* series, but it was with *Battlefield 2* that piss-and-moan provocation started to pay. "The game is a godsend," he says. "The notion that you need points to unlock further features means that my targets won't want to leave servers so soon. Plus, it makes it more infuriating when frustration leads to friendly fire, and friendly fire leads to lost points. I never do deathmatch. What makes this work is that the target and I are on the same team. I'm out to harass them and it doesn't matter if I die doing it."

Prior to playing foul, Silkenbow stakes out and sizes up victims. "People tend to play the

000,000 credits

QUISSON



CONTRACT
NO

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Confessions Start

GLIALOK



BACKGROUND

PLAY STYLE

ACCEPT CONTRACT
YES NO

ENTER LEAF

ELECTRONIC HIT MAN

same way again and again," he says, "meaning that they'll choose to spawn on the front lines or back at home base. They'll grab vehicles or go out on foot. Ultimately, I use this ability to anticipate a person's actions against them. And the last thing I look for is a patsy, someone whose skill level isn't up to snuff. That's who I blame later, because nobody questions it when a bad player plays badly.

"Let me illustrate: Last night in 2142, I joined a team with a serverless clan I'm supposed to torment," he says. "I started by blowing up our own satellite-scanning and UAV-tracking stations, and then taking out our EMP and orbital bombardment arrays. I took two tanks and trapped 'em into tight spots between steep hills. I flew a fully occupied dropship down into a bunch of friendlies, bailed out before it blew, and then blamed one of the passengers. I wounded players, pestering them to the point where they'd shoot me on sight. The thing is that I don't even need [friendly fire] enabled to make a mess of it. I take vehicles over to the other team,

play as commander and supply the opposition, say I've spotted the enemy here when they're over there.... 2142 is alarming in that I'm almost unnecessary—one reason I'm really waiting for *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* and *Unreal Tournament 3*."

Epic Games' Jeff Morris says Silkenbow's "business" seems farfetched. "Why," he wonders with us, "would anyone cough up 20 bucks to have a guy fly a transport into the ground when a million kids out there are willing to do it for free? This sounds more like he's social engineering someone on IRC into paying him 20 bucks to make the sun rise. Players who 'deserve' griefing are going to run into griefers no matter what. It also seems incorrect to call him a hit man, since that indicates precision. Griefers in team games ruin everyone's fun, whether they 'deserve' it or not."

"I hope this 'fallen angel' isn't supporting a family, since they'll stay hungry," quips Digital Illusions CE creative director Lars Gustavsson. "As [*Battlefield*] community manager Colin Clarke puts it: 'While the

majority of gamers do take gaming very seriously, I doubt this guy has any serious sort of business. Server admins sometimes track an offensive player's IP and spread the word that any person playing from that IP is to be banned on sight. In other words, any proclaimed grief service would suffer diminishing returns as every negative action would add more to its provider's negative reputation."

"One reason I play a regular round or two before starting trouble is to build trust with the team," Silkenbow replies. "Some developer somewhere should hire me. Believe it or not, I tried to talk to Sierra way back when with an offer to share my insight into how people play *Tribes 2*. They 'politely declined' is one way to put it."

Morris isn't exactly hearing it either. "99 percent of [*Unreal Tournament's*] servers are friendly fire-free," he says. "While that doesn't mean you can't raise hell, it puts this guy squarely in the 'badly singing Britney Spears songs into his mic' category." Or Alice Cooper's "Gimme," as it were. • **Shawn Elliott**

DEATHMATCHING FOR HEREPS

Skirmishing in Huxley's persistent world

PUBLISHER: Webzen
DEVELOPER: Webzen
GENRE: MMO First-Person Shooter
RELEASE DATE: 2007

PREVIEW

Webzen is still keeping its cards tight to the vest with *Huxley*, its massively multiplayer first-person shooter that first graced our cover way back in November 2005, but we did get the game's production director, Ki Jong "K.J." Kang, to dribble out new facts about the game's deathmatching. As Webzen has stressed all along, *Huxley*, powered by Unreal Engine 3, will place more emphasis on gamers' twitch skills than on characters' stats—and nowhere will this be made clearer than in the deathmatches, where players will put aside the game's larger MMO-style concerns to indulge in some good old-fashioned fragging and trash-talking. ● Jeff Green

GFW: Who controls the setup and conditions of the matches? Players or Webzen? Are the maps and matches level-based, as in *World of Warcraft's* Battlegrounds, so that say, only players of a certain level range can enter? Or is it totally open?

KI JONG KANG: Imagine a master server of sorts, much like what you find in current FPS games. Players can sign up for a match, much like *WoW*'s Battleground queues, allowing for specific parameters to be set and met. There aren't many "open" battles that players can

just randomly jump into, as they have already started within certain parameters. That's not to say that players can't be notified via an in-game system that their faction is at risk of losing a battle and a ship is at the ready waiting for volunteers to be brought to it via dropship.

GFW: But where will players find these matches? How easy will it be to get into one? Can you walk us through that process?

KJK: We're making it as easy as possible, given how complex it really is. For example: A player walks up to the battle-zone terminal, like the master server I just mentioned, and is given a multitude of options, starting with continent choice, battle-zone location, battle-zone type, and transportation schedules to selected zones—standard or dropship.

GFW: Do players enter these matches with all their current stats, gear, and so on? Or are you limiting it in some way?

KJK: Yes, players are persistent. So unless you've purposely swapped out gear or skills for a specific match, or not replenished your power source, you will go into your next battle exactly the way you left your last one.

GFW: Will there be any kind of persistent ranking or ladder system of these matches across servers?

KJK: We definitely will have a persistent ranking and ladder system, but [those] details are still being worked out. It may be across servers—or restricted to a player's specific server.

GFW: What kind of rewards, if any, will players get for participating? Do *Huxley's* deathmatches "count" toward a player's leveling or are they just "for fun"?

KJK: Players will get tactical experience and XP toward leveling up, yes. Oh, and loot—lots of loot—if quest mobs are present. Players will earn battle points, which are used in conjunction with standard XP to level up.

GFW: Why all the focus right now on the FPS elements?

Shouldn't you be worrying about the bigger MMO issues, too?

KJK: *Huxley* is a big game, with small- to large-scale FPS battles, single-player missions, quests with lots of smaller tasks to do, and all the features expected in today's MMO market. But with *Huxley's* combat being based on FPS play, that is where the focus has been. It's crucial for us to ensure the gameplay is unique to *Huxley*, yet still fun and accessible to FPS players of other games. So we're focusing on really tweaking the shooter gameplay right now and getting that nailed down, then we'll be focusing on the MMO aspects.

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• "We want our monsters to be vicious, deadly mercenaries," says director David Nadal. "We're collaborating with [middleware maker] Kynogon on an advanced A.I. system that strategizes, analyzes environments, and adapts to player behavior."



ALONE IN THE DARK

A new beginning for the bone-old thriller

PUBLISHER: Atari DEVELOPER: Eden Games GENRE: Survival-horror RELEASE DATE: Fall 2007

PREVIEW

Fear is the one emotion gaming best engages. *Alone in the Dark* director David Nadal agrees: "It's the one that's easiest to build, too. We never need lifelike facial expressions or far-flung technology to establish fear, just the ability to play with suggestion and a player's anticipation." Alfred Hitchcock aside, Nadal argues that spooky computer games can't settle for cinematic technique alone. Film plays on a passive public, a state of affairs previous horror games reproduced by restricting players' agency with intentionally clunky controls. For *Alone in the Dark*, however, Nadal wants players to fully "author" their own actions in each and every situation, to enjoy freedom of movement and the ability to

interact with the environment, all in the spirit of using anything at hand to survive at all costs. Interactivity shouldn't make scaring us silly any tougher, since the more immersed we are, the more instinctively we'll soil ourselves. It's with this logic that hero Edward Carnby hotwires a car, rifles through glove boxes, and wriggles from front- to backseat when something threatens to smash its way through the driver's window. "All this," according to Nadal, "without resorting to a catchall 'use' button." Same for self-defense, he says: "We aren't limiting players to a weapons locker. We have your typical handguns and the like, but what we really want is to make you think beyond bland point-and-shoot play. What happens when bullets won't kill the enemy? I can't completely reveal the combat system, but the environment, as well as items you combine and

construct, is everything. In addition, the way you move the mouse or analog stick mirrors the action onscreen." As Eden Games brushes in fine detail, it also aims to paint a story in broad strokes inspired by television serials such as *24* and *Lost*. "Episodes without the wait," they dub it, but how, at the end of the day, does describing *Alone in the Dark* as an entire season on a single DVD amount to more than rebranding videogaming's classic "levels" convention? "Each 'episode' offers an intense moment," Nadal says. "Narration and gameplay, telling and showing, are tightly intertwined and totally thought through. Character evolution, plot revelations, and cliff-hangers pace each episode...this is unlike previous methods of level design." Sounds like the same old to us. Nadal says we'll see. • **Shawn Elliott**

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• *EE2* was an überdiplomat's dream—but often simply overwhelming. "We've slimmed down the diplomacy [interface] a great deal, to the point where most things can be accomplished with a single button click," says lead designer Matthew Nordhaus.



• Nordhaus reveals that "terminal military options include [but are not limited to] nukes, biological weapons, and giant mutant...er...I've said too much already!"

EMPIRE OF A THOUSAND AND ONE FEATURES

Mad Doc blasts into orbit with *Empire Earth III*

PUBLISHER: Vivendi Games DEVELOPER: Mad Doc GENRE: Real-Time Strategy RELEASE DATE: Fall 2007

PREVIEW

➔ "All-in-one" as a concept gives rise to ups and downs. One fan's all-inclusiveness is another's substantive noose. Real-time strategy games may be the worst offenders, often frenetic hives of jostling platoons you're obliged to orchestrate (however clumsily) via ad hoc button grids and up-to-four-finger hotkey salutes, plying panel-packed screens perplexing as yesterday's flight-sim keyboard overlays (remember those?). Case in point: The *Empire Earth* series is no stranger to feature deluge, winning both praise and scorn from RTS fans for its Herculean

hoarding of components inside options wrapped in attributes.

If anything, *Empire Earth III* intends to capitalize on that approach, deepening tactical distinctions while generalizing factional diversity to address complaints leveled at *Empire Earth II*'s 14 largely homogenous civilizations. Instead of 14 factions, try just three: Far East, Middle East, and West, each with unique units, buildings, technologies, and powers—and this time, more than ever, according to developer Mad Doc, outcomes premised on decision-driven evolution.

"Within each region, there's a tremendous amount of customization possible," says lead designer Matthew Nordhaus, describing the way >

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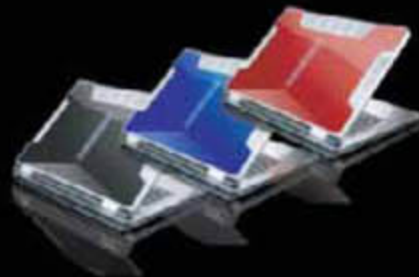


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civilizations now develop more asymmetrically. "Our design, [as before], is to make tech choices precious. There's no single 'optimal' selection for every situation, so the choices you make will lead to more organic civilizations." Above all, think subtle tech-driven permutations that lead to far less predictable "rock-paper-scissors" clashes.

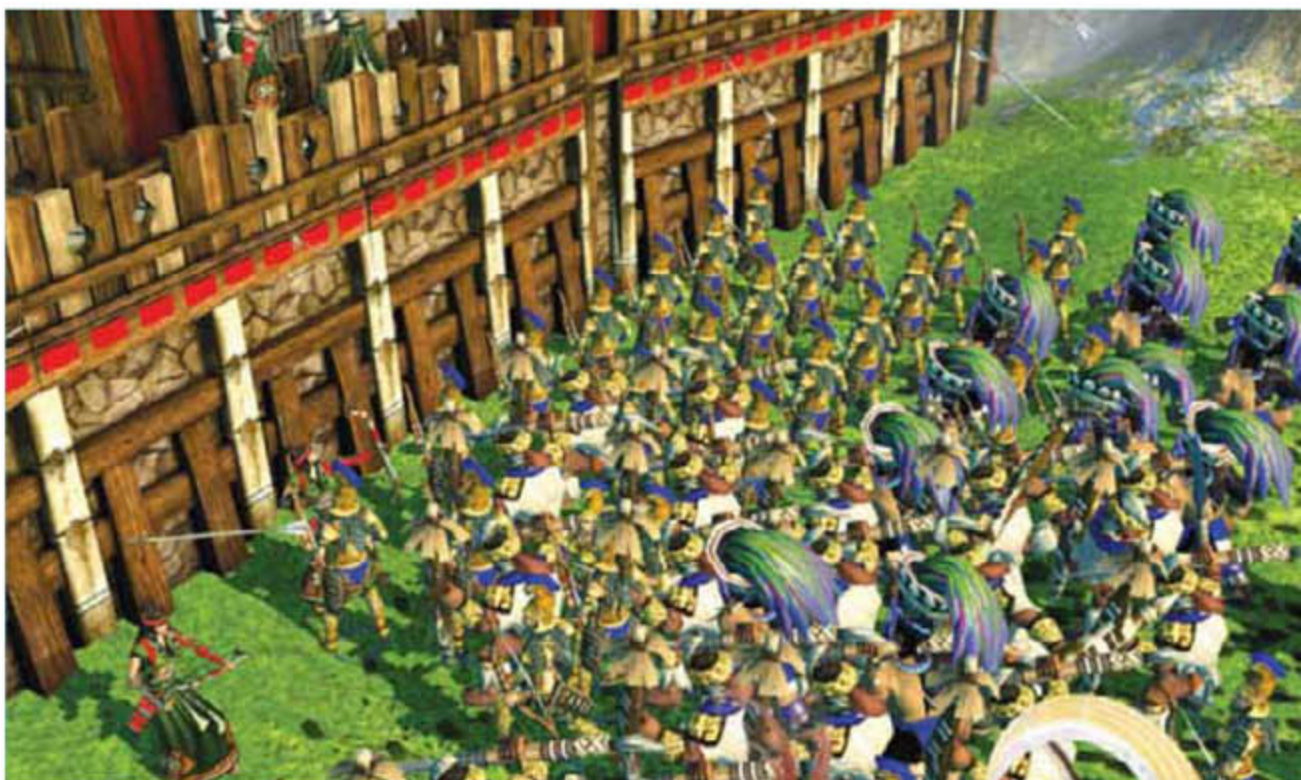
Achieving that kind of dynamic complexity hinges largely on *EE3*'s retooled scope. Imagine Google Earth wed to *Risk* in which you're strategizing economic doctrines and army thrusts on a planetary level reaching from roughly 1000 B.C. to 2300 A.D. "We now have a complete and robust metemap game," says Nordhaus, referring to *EE3*'s new "World Domination" mode, a turn-based strategic layer that renders the planet in discrete, conquerable chunks, from Amazon to Sahara. "At this level, you're building spies and armies, conducting research, using special world powers, and so on. Armies are how you'll move units from province to province, spies let you scope out the world, and special powers give you world-level advantages, [such as] letting your armies move through multiple provinces in a single turn or creating resistance fighters if your province is invaded."

What's more, *EE3*'s engine is now event-driven, meaning no more scripted campaigns with link-locked maps. "Think of a quest system from an RPG," Nordhaus says. "Objectives are offered, and you can accept or not." Complete them and you get a substantial reward, but you aren't obligated to—events fire dynamically, contingent upon your choices. And this time, those choices carry positional tactical weight. "Every unit [of 200 at last count] and building will actually stay on its map until it's destroyed or upgraded," Nordhaus says. "No more 'build a base' every time you enter an area."

And there's no more building futuristic units analogous to their older-era predecessors. "We're actually giving you the choice to research abilities that create new roles for existing units," Nordhaus says. For instance, research "torch" for your swordsmen and buildings they attack will burn, or try "lunge mine" for your Eastern infantry and they'll take on an antitank role. Nordhaus says these abilities aren't as strong as a full counter, but are designed to let you specialize in a given unit class without scouring the entire tech tree.

And you won't just battle other factions—*EE3*'s world is bristling with independent natives, pirates, barbarians, and cultists as well. "We have a variety of native tribes that lie in wait," Nordhaus says. "Some want to trade with you, some are disposed to ally with you, some just want to be left alone so they can fish. And, of course, a few will hate you on sight and go for your jugular—they may even be more technologically advanced [than you], so watch out." And watch for your chance to take over the world, one zone at a time, later this year. • **Matt Peckham**

 **EE3'S WORLD IS BRISTLING WITH INDEPENDENT NATIVES, PIRATES, BARBARIANS, AND CULTISTS.**



• RTS games are, by and large, CPU-bound—so Mad Doc is focusing on implementing multithreading in the engine.



• *EE2*'s "epochs" are out in favor of a more progressive tech approach.

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WARMONGER—OPERATION: DOWNTOWN DESTRUCTION

Can NetDevil's free FPS bring down the house?

DEVELOPER: NetDevil PUBLISHER: TBA GENRE: First-Person Shooter RELEASE DATE: 2008

PREVIEW

This preview isn't so much about a game as it is about a technology. Stick with us, though, because what NetDevil is attempting next after its ambitious action MMO *Auto Assault* is worth the wait for 2008.

Auto Assault's action and in-game physics were great. Unfortunately, the game ran out of gas—and players. NetDevil president Scott Brown says he learned valuable lessons from that experience. Now, the MMO maker hopes to break out with a first-person shooter. *Warmonger—Operation: Downtown Destruction* sheds the pay-to-play MMO model in favor of a different approach. It glistens with Unreal Engine 3 graphics; it highlights the strengths of Ageia's PhysX PPU (Ageia = the guys behind those wacky \$250 physics cards); and it's 100 percent free.

You read that right. The plan for now is to create a multiplayer taste of the near future, gratis. Beyond that, anything goes—urban decay, civil war in the streets, and a whole lot of crap going “boom.”

GETTING PHYSICAL

Why make a game requiring a hardware physics card instead of sticking with software-driven

Havok physics (which NetDevil used in *Auto Assault*)? Isn't NetDevil limiting its audience? Collaborating with Ageia affords NetDevil the chance to create insane amounts of onscreen mayhem for its ultimate shooter. What does Ageia get out of the deal? A desperately needed showcase of what hardware-driven PhysX is capable of doing. Think about it—3D graphics didn't take center stage until games such as *Tomb Raider* and *GL Quake* hit the scene.

Can *Warmonger's* physics bring down the house and bring in the crowds? Brown thinks that while “graphics improve, FPS gameplay hasn't fundamentally evolved much past *Doom*.” He wants to destroy expectations by destroying the game world.

The best way to show off the ramifications of in-game physics is by basing *Warmonger* in an urban combat zone, not an open battlefield. Building and then deconstructing a metropolis introduces opportunities and challenges. “We're giving the whole game world real physical properties,” Brown says. “So, in a building, you can break through drywall with a rocket launcher or lay down C4 and booby-trap the floor so that people can't reach the objective...we want to force you outside the usual rat maze.” Blowing through walls might not sound new, but being

able to do it anywhere in the world? That's a whole other matter. *Red Faction's* Geo-Mod tech dabbled in this idea, but it was software-driven and too far ahead of its time. It was also a design trick: You could break through some walls but not others. “Most game levels have this arbitrary design. You can knock down this wall, but that chain-link fence is indestructible,” Brown says. But what if you could knock buildings down to their very foundations? Snipers can blow up a staircase to deter intruders. Demo experts can drop ceilings on people below. And none of the destruction is prerendered.

When asked about how the game will play out, Brown is a little more evasive for the moment. It's very early in the process—the game doesn't even have a formal publisher yet. However, thanks to the partnership with Ageia, NetDevil has a cash infusion to plan for a free-play mode. Five multiplayer maps with full server stat-tracking will be available early next year.

Many questions remain, but at the top of Brown's list is if *Warmonger* can succeed. “Sure, it's a gamble, making a game that requires a specific piece of hardware. Being free helps, but we hope that the game can justify [the card].” • **Darren Gladstone**



Genetic Science - A Weapon for the Future

To arms, sci-fi real-time strategy and role-playing fans: The future of space-based exploration and combat is here. Its name, already renowned the world over... Genesis Rising.

Three millennia hence, the galaxy lies shattered. Following the so-called Savior's arrival, humanity declares itself master of the known universe. A war for genetic superiority reigns. All alien opposition is crushed; all resistance, obliterated. Wholesale use of 'organids,' genetically-engineered weapons of war, becomes commonplace. At the behest of the species' supreme governing body, The Chair of Three, headstrong Captain Iconah sets off on an assignment that will change the course of fate itself. His mission: Locate and uncover the mysteries of the Universal Heart, a legendary entity from which all life and matter spawned.

Taking command of swooping fighters, bristling battleships and fleets of bio-mechanical monstrosities - glistening fusions of man and machine - ruthlessly exterminate foes throughout an epic, 30-mission solo campaign or jaw-dropping 12-player LAN and online skirmishes. Non-linear story progression lets you determine how the saga

unfolds, while full coop support allows allies to join forces and scour massive starfields teeming with swirling gases, glowing nebulae and bullet- or missile-spewing enemy cruisers. Ship models don't just look stunning, pulsating with unholy life and belching forth colored, high-resolution streams of plasma or flaming projectiles atop this heavenly backdrop. They also morph and evolve before your eyes as you implant special weapons, energy boosters, warps and other gene-enhancing abilities pilfered from unsuspecting crews or harvested from adversaries' smoking carcasses.

A mind-blowing 50+ different upgrades and powers can further be dynamically assigned to the over 20 vessels at your disposal, forcing one's tactics to change with every battle. Meaning that no matter how many times you play, no two games, or individual engagements, are ever alike. Forge alliances with non-player characters to access supplies and ammo. Build and defend bases crammed with floating fortresses, DNA-splicing laboratories and murderous motherships. Pan and zoom across immense interstellar backdrops in the blink of an eye, enjoying dazzling close-ups of or bird's eye perspectives on any conflict with a wholly customizable camera system. Or just activate your shields, set thrusters to maximum speed and rocket past tumbling asteroids and ancient altars on a collision course with destiny, lasers and guided rockets thundering.

Only one rule stands: A healer of vessels and the essential building block of all biotic matter,



bloodair is the ultimate resource - and, hence, the whole of the law. Wrench it from pooling reservoirs, squeeze vital fluids from rivals' broken and battered frames or watch in rapt majesty and horror as it explodes from your screen in supernovastyle geysers when opponents are vanquished. A seamless fusion of supply-gathering, scientific research and brutal melees, Genesis Rising may be a game for players of all skill levels, but not the faint of heart.

With its riveting mix of tense armada-building, shotgun diplomacy and white-knuckle standoffs, Genesis Rising's place in history is assured. The only question is: Will you live long enough to savor the spoils of victory?

Scott Steinberg





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Scoring free games without the icky "pirate" aftertaste

XTREAS

FREE GAMES!

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➤ **There's this TV show, *Numb3rs*.** Maybe you've heard of it. It's the one with the highly plausible plot where number-juggling geniuses solve crimes for the FBI. Sexy, eh? Well, I just realized that I love math—and not because of the HAWT math grad student on the show. I love number-crunching. What? You think that just 'cause a guy sits on his duff, finding new ways to glom off his fellow man, he can't calculate like a mofo?

Check this sum: Euclidean geometry helped me lay out my mooching HQ's home theater in perfect congruity. Thanks to Newtonian physics, I figured out the exact trajectory and amount of force that's required of my balled-up sock to turn on the microwave. I know pizza pie to 15 places. That is, I know how to score a pizza pie on Buy One, Get One Free Thursdays without paying the full price. (Tip No. 20: Find someone about to go into said pizza shop, inform of the deal, and split the cost of one pie.) That said, let me break out some gaming math for you with this month's picks. •The Freeloader



THE GAME: **Blocksum**
FILE UNDER: (Tetris + art class) x math class

A new game is about to join the pantheon of perfect puzzlers. Remember all those times on a *Tetris* tear, blazing through matched rows to the point you'd see geometric shapes dropping not just in your sleep but also in the real world? Well, imagine those shapes with numbers inside them. Seriously, people—you've been warned. The basics behind the game: You need to match up shapes and the numbers. For instance, you need at least five blocks with the number "5" inside them before they fade away. Now, before you start getting crazy, seeing math computations everywhere (à la *A Beautiful Mind*) remember that even educational games can be fun—well, at least occasionally.



THE GAME: **Levitar 3D: Evolved**
FILE UNDER: *Lunar Lander*/Scramble

Finally, someone fused two classic arcade games I'd dumped countless quarters into at the local Chuck E. Cheese's. The gameplay is simple enough for even a chimp with a button-mashing disorder. You've got bombs, guns, and tractor beams to help clean out the enemy bases. The only thing missing is the telltale pizza-grease residue from my old arcade haunting grounds.



THE GAME: **Fire and Forget**
FILE UNDER: Shooter x Music Video

Here's a short, sweet, and simple idea that more people need to get behind: indie gaming as a music video. Say a band wants to get its name out there—but how? Make a quick stylish-as-all-get-out shooter that plays to the music. The chorus: a mini-bombing run on a city. You get the idea. Brilliant tactic; fun, short game; and one more song stuck in my head.



THE GAME: **And Yet It Moves**
FILE UNDER: 2D Scroller + Cut-and-Paste

Someone just crumpled up a couple of pieces of paper, animated them...and made a game out of it? It may look like an acid-induced art project—and that may still be the case—but it also happens to be a fun and inventive 2D scrolling game. The twist, besides the art, is being able to rotate the world while you play.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY: APRIL 2007

High noon in PC gaming's Wild West



THE GOOD BURNING CRUSADE TAKES OVER THE WORLD

The first *World of Warcraft* expansion, *The Burning Crusade*,

sold a total of 2.4 million copies worldwide during its first day at retail, with eager fans lining up to get their copies. For those actually counting at home, that's 100,000 copies sold per hour...to 100,000 people that haven't seen sunlight in two years. And this is only an expansion! Already, this could be the best-selling game—PC or console—of 2007.



THE BAD THE KOREAN GOLD FARMER UNION

The South Korean government's plan to regulate (and tax) virtual income

and assets has the gold-farming community up in arms—and it's reached a point where several **ahem** "reputable" gold-farming institutions have joined forces to form DADPA, the Digital Asset Distribution Promotion Association. Yes, you're reading that right: a gold-farmer union lobbying the South Korean government. Cue the world's tiniest violin for 'em.



THE UGLY VANGUARD: WORST TIMING EVER

Yet another supposed

World of Warcraft-killer, fantasy MMO *Vanguard: Saga of Heroes* (helmed by *EverQuest* alumni Brad McQuaid and Jeff Butler), launched January 31st to the sound of crickets. "The financial reality is [that] we need to launch commercially, and soon," McQuaid explained on *Vanguard's* official forum prior to launch when questioned about performance issues.

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MIDWAY

1997

Produces the acclaimed strategy game *Total Annihilation* for Cavedog Entertainment.



1998

Founds Washington-based studio Gas Powered Games.

2002

Produces the hack-n-slash RPG *Dungeon Siege*, which is published by Microsoft.



2005

Produces the follow-up *Dungeon Siege II*, also published by Microsoft.



2007

Produces *Supreme Commander*, the spiritual successor to *Total Annihilation*.



THE GFW INTERVIEW: CHRIS TAYLOR

The biggest kid in the gaming industry BY RYAN SCOTT

INTERVIEW

GFW: You ran the show for both *Total Annihilation* and *Supreme Commander*, and your RTS designs have always been pretty ambitious. Is anything cooking up there in your head that you haven't been able to apply to any game designs quite yet?

CHRIS TAYLOR: Sure, there's always lots of that...and we hope to get another good round of ambitious features into our next RTS project just to prove it! And of course, those dual Quad Duo Core CPUs won't hurt our wild ambitions, either...more power, Scotty!

GFW: What do you think of some of the recent advancements that companies like Relic have made with RTS games in comparison to your own games?

CT: I think Relic's *Company of Heroes* is an amazing achievement in visual realism, and has production value unlike anything we've seen before...big kudos to that team! Generally speaking, it takes the game to a very tactical level, where *SupCom* goes for the big, strategic, theater of war-type experience. Both are valid, and very different—and hopefully, both [are] really fun!

GFW: You're also a big World War II buff—do you apply any of that knowledge to your strategy games' design and A.I.?

CT: I am, indeed, as I find the history [of the war] absolutely fascinating. Having said that, our A.I. engineer/designer, John Comes, has his own experience [that] drives his work. I use the World War II history to shape the unit design and the way the overall air, land, and sea components come together as a whole. And, of course, Gas Powered Games' team of amazingly talented people all bring something to it as well; it's a team effort, after all.

GFW: Humble as always! Speaking of which, you're something of a big name when it comes

to PC games. What's your take on "celebrity" game design? Do you think this sort of hype creates unfair expectations or hinders your development process in any way?

CT: For the most part, I really don't pay much attention to it. But it's definitely much easier to get a game funded when you have a history in the business than it is when you are an unknown designer. Past that, it doesn't really change the development process. I will admit that I can generate a little more buzz in the community—which never hurts—but the game concept has to support it. Otherwise, the hype vanishes pretty quickly.

GFW: If review scores are to be believed, the *Dungeon Siege* games definitely fell victim to overhype [the recent *Dungeon Siege II: Broken World* received a 6 out of 10 score on 1UP.com]. Do you have anything to say to your DS2 critics?

CT: We aren't happy with low review scores, and have asked some very serious questions about why the game was disappointing to the press. Each game has its own development story, and *Broken World* is no exception...but we can only aspire to correct past mistakes and endeavor to do a better job next time. Ultimately, we look to our customers to tell us what they think of our games, and make every effort to listen to that feedback... that's the feedback that counts to us the most.

GFW: How involved were you with the Uwe Boll-directed *In the Name of the King: A Dungeon Siege Tale*? How'd it ultimately turn out?

CT: During the time when the movie script was being developed and the actual movie was being shot I was very busy with *SupCom*. I had a hard time keeping up with every script revision process, and all the other developments in the preproduction phase. I focused my time here at Gas Powered Games, and only managed to visit the actual set once. I regret not getting up to meet Burt Reynolds...that would have been awesome. I did get a chance to meet Jason Statham, Claire

Forlani, and Ray Liotta—that was a blast, to say the least. The big shocker: I haven't actually seen the movie yet. For whatever reason, the stars have not aligned, and I'll end up seeing it the same time you do.

GFW: Following up on that, you've recently commissioned a *Supreme Commander* film script from screenwriter (and GFW contributor) Robert Coffey. Can you talk about this yet?

CT: I have, indeed—and Robert's done an excellent job. It's all part of our wanting to be much more proactive about the whole filmmaking process...and we have agents who will properly represent us and everything, all professional-like. Big time, here we come!

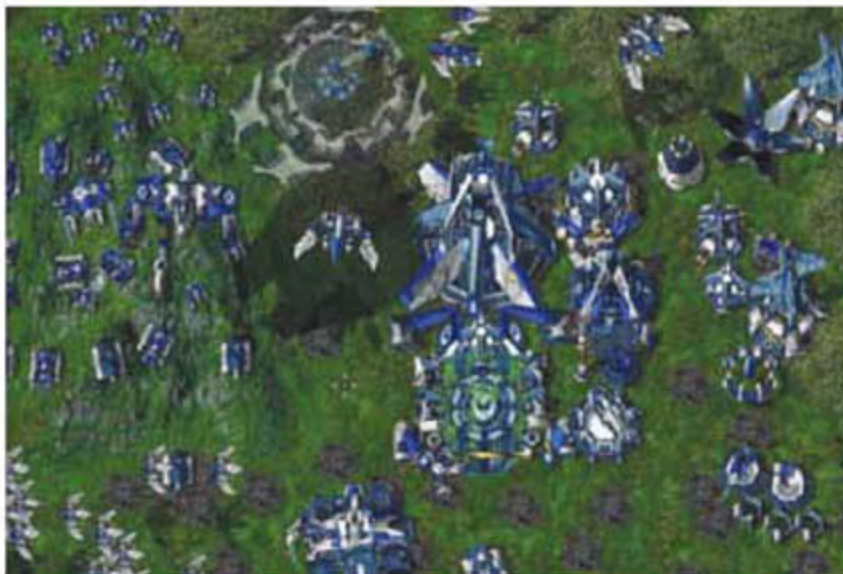
GFW: Easy there, Chris—you've still got games to make. What else have you got on tap? Are you still wholly devoted to PC gaming, or have you looked into entering the console market?

CT: Absolutely. We're always looking and, believe it or not, we have a brand-new, original game that we're working on that hasn't been announced yet. I can tell you that it's being developed for the Xbox 360—and that's because we love the platform and think the 360's online experience is world-class.

GFW: It's a different experience, for sure. I know you're a technology nut, though—and PC tech is currently moving faster than most of us can keep up with. Got any thoughts on recent PC hardware advancements?

CT: Lately, it has really become a contest between the incredible advancements in rendering technology and the huge technological leaps in available CPU power. We game developers are in heaven, because there's no end in sight to this progress. Ultimately, what this means is that we'll have plenty of resources to deliver the most awesome game experiences anyone has seen yet. Outside of these key advancements, the next biggest advancement goes to Internet providers who keep adding more and more bandwidth to our networks—we can play multiplayer games with people across the country and around the world. It's really something we might only have dreamed about when I started in this business. And now the leap to a 64-bit operating system solves our addressing space problems. It's a technology love-fest and it's awesome! ●

I THINK RELIC'S *COMPANY OF HEROES* IS AN AMAZING ACHIEVEMENT IN VISUAL REALISM...BIG KUDOS TO THAT TEAM!



● *Total Annihilation* (1997): Chris Taylor's much-revered cyber-future real-time strategy game.

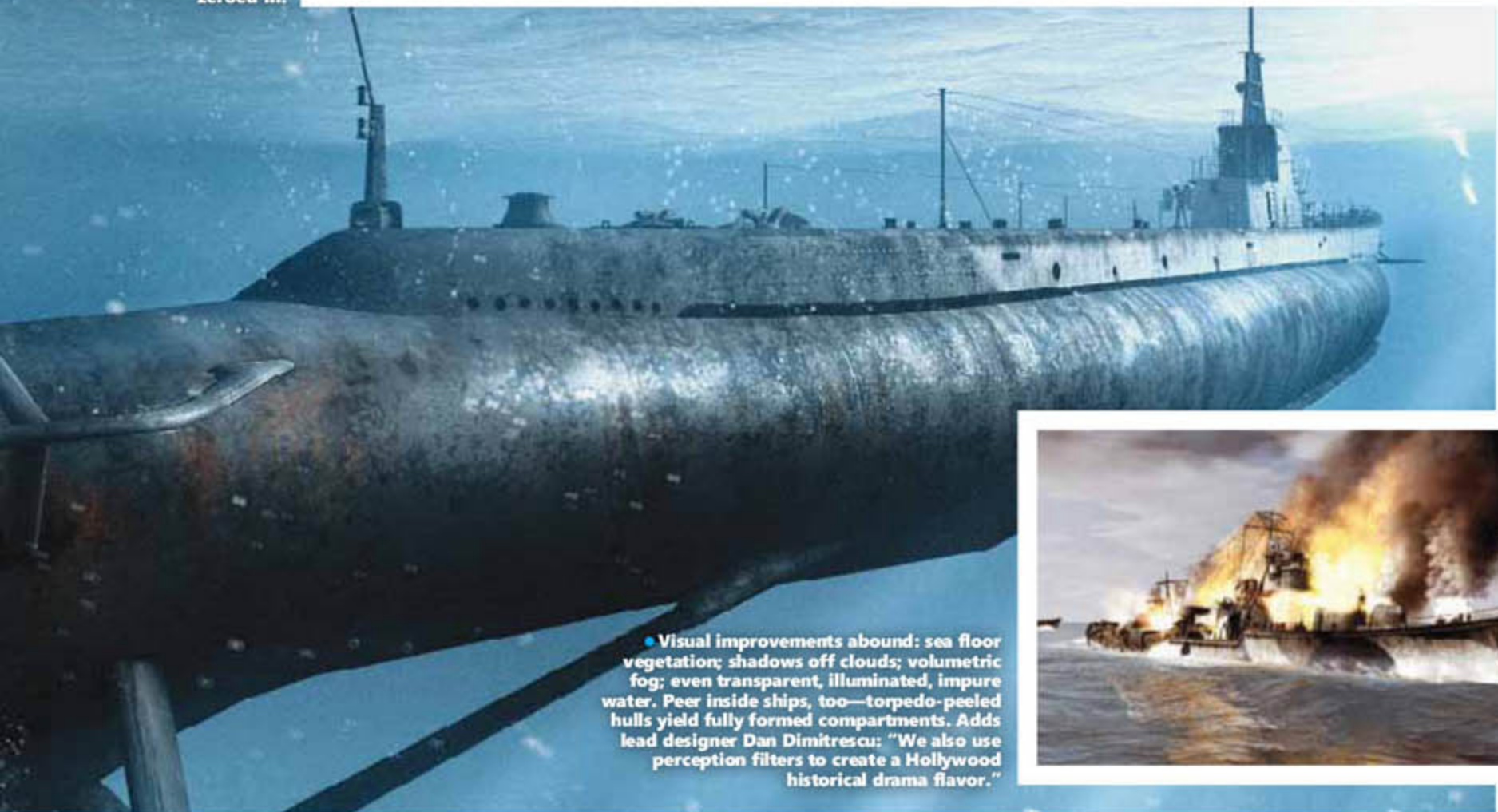


● *Supreme Commander* (2007): Taylor's long-awaited, just-released TA follow-up. How does it measure up? See our review on Page 78.

Ubisoft Romania's taking special care to replicate everything from split-image stadimeters (measures angles to gauge range) and the American-style TDC (torpedo data computer) with a position keeper that facilitates attacking your target minutes after you've zeroed in.



Silent Hunter packs 80-plus ship models, including aircraft carriers, battleships, cruisers, escorts, and merchants representing the U.S and Imperial Japanese navies and the Japanese Merchant Marine.



Visual improvements abound: sea floor vegetation; shadows off clouds; volumetric fog; even transparent, illuminated, impure water. Peer inside ships, too—torpedo-peeled hulls yield fully formed compartments. Adds lead designer Dan Dimitrescu: "We also use perception filters to create a Hollywood historical drama flavor."



SILENT HUNTER: WOLVES OF THE PACIFIC

Silent runner trades nationals, adds careers, shuffles theaters

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Ubisoft Romania** GENRE: **Simulation** RELEASE DATE: **March 2007**

PREVIEW

Pacific theater sub sims scare World War II buffs on steady diets of *The Enemy Below*, *Das Boot*, and *U-571*. In film, sexed-up German *Unterseeboots* ("undersea boats"), fan-favorite submersibles featured in the last two *Silent Hunter* games, prowl the Atlantic. In reaction to publisher Ubisoft's August 2006 notice that *Silent Hunter: Wolves of the Pacific* (the fourth in the series, though published without a "4") would focus on "Yanks" in the Pacific, sim-ers fret: "What, no U-boats?!" and "U.S. forces = lack of mystique," or even, "The Japanese sub fleet was even less ready than the German *U-Boot Waffe* in 1939!"

Now peer back a couple decades. *Silent Service*—the first *Silent Hunter*—came out in 1985, designed by, of all people, Sid Meier for old-school granddaddy MicroProse, and set in—any guesses? That's right, the Pacific.

"We kind of expected this reaction when we decided on the Pacific War," says lead designer Dan Dimitrescu. "But the Atlantic and Pacific were completely different in terms of naval World War

II engagements—each had its own flavor." Flavor gleaned from tech in particular. U.S. subs were larger, faster, and had longer ranges than U-boats. They also packed a bigger punch with 10 torpedo tubes standard. But they were less maneuverable and buckled at extreme depths. "Thus, from the hunter's perspective, U.S. subs were quicker to adopt surface search radar and employ it in action," says Dimitrescu. "For new players, that makes finding and sinking targets much easier."

Easier, and...simpler? No way, says Dimitrescu. "*Wolves of the Pacific* is as much a simulator as *Silent Hunter 3*. We're just taking steps to make the interface more friendly as well as more powerful—it's forward motion for both casual and hardcore sim players." Likewise for crew delegation and careers. Think scalability with all-in-one feedback and more natural interaction. "We're letting you decide how much involvement you want this time," says Dimitrescu. "If you want to dig in, you can, but you don't have to."

However you roll, you'll share increasingly "human" company. Crewmen stand watch for four hours, then rest for eight. Holler "battle stations" and everyone beelines for their stations.

Some guys can even (accurately) double up on ship duties. "We've also added role-playing elements to the crew over the course of the campaign," says Dimitrescu. "Depending on their experience, all crew members can be promoted, gain special abilities, and improve their skills." And when you switch subs, you can take your choice picks with you.

Wrap that up in an even more lifelike unscripted campaign with fluid performance-assigned objectives, and we could be looking at the most meticulous imitation of wartime slink-and-sink yet. **• Matt Peckham**

Y'ALL SUNK MY BATTLESHIP!

Imagine someone heaving destroyers, escorts, convoys, and more at a bunch of armchair sub commandos, say seven on a LAN or three over the Internet. It's called "adversarial mode," and it's (finally) in *Silent Hunter 4*. "The control is strategic, not simulation in nature," notes lead designer Dan Dimitrescu. "While everyone else plays the sub sim, surface commanders are ordering escorts to take positions around protected units or tweaking the aggressiveness level, which dictates unit reactions to enemy contacts." Can you say RTS meets hardcore sim?

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• One of the stops on The Gatekeeper quest where you assemble parts of a new giant.

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: SHIVERING ISLES

Oblivion goes mad

PUBLISHER: 2K Games DEVELOPER: Bethesda Softworks GENRE: Roleplaying RELEASE DATE: Spring 2007

PREVIEW

It always happens this way. Just when you're finally ready to move on from a life-devouring role-playing game, they release an expansion, and you're sucked right back in. *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* is no different. Its expansion, *Shivering Isles*, brings you 30 more hours of epic roleplaying, a totally unexplored world, and new items, weapons, armor, ingredients, and quests—all layered on top of the same polished gameplay that made *Oblivion* GFW's 2006 Game of the Year.

Opening up another plane of Oblivion, the expansion takes you to the Shivering Isles, the realm of Sheogorath, the Daedric Prince of Madness (you may remember him from the Daedric Shrine quest in *Oblivion*). Sheogorath's plane is divided into two realms, Dementia and Mania, and you'll spend your time traveling

seamlessly between them and performing tasks for the dukes that rule each side. Dementia is a dark and horrific place, with claustrophobic environments, gloomy towns, and rivers flowing with sludge. Mania is the realm of psychosis and chaos—brightly colored and wild. It's a change from *Oblivion's* traditional medieval setting, and if it reminds you a bit of *Morrowind's* more exotic art direction, that's appropriate. "Our artist looked at *Morrowind* as a source of inspiration," says Bethesda's Pete Hines.

As you venture through this world, you'll discover that Sheogorath is looking for a mortal champion to protect his realm—and, naturally, that's where you come in. The game is fundamentally the same as *Oblivion*, but the emphasis this time is on the freedom to solve quests however you want. "We tried to let [players] have more choices in how they can solve particular quests," says Hines. For example, early on, you need to

defeat the Gatekeeper—a giant behemoth that guards the entrance to the Shivering Isles. You can fight him outright, which is a difficult but winnable battle. Or you can poke around in town and ask villagers for tips that will lead you to other possible solutions. "Because there are fewer NPCs in this world, we were able to spend more time on each of them in terms of their personalities, stories, and dialogue," says Hines. "And for all of the quests, we give you more than one path through." This should add even more depth to a game already renowned for its free-form exploration and wide-open world.

The expansion will add the new content to your existing save, and you can travel freely back and forth from the Shivering Isles to Cyrodiil, picking back up where and when you left off in the first game. And isn't that just what you needed—another reason to get sucked back into *Oblivion*?

• Jennifer Tsao

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RANDOM ACCESS

10 things we're into this month

1 SHAMELESS PLUG

Flip over to GFW.FileFront.com and treat yourself to an exclusive *Counter-Strike: Source* map, courtesy of the folks at Threewave. Consider it our gift to you, the loyal GFW readers—and the disloyal ones. Don't worry, there are no subliminal ads to brainwash you into naming your firstborn "Ralphie." We didn't have enough time.

2 DOMO ARIGATO

Save the frozen humans, save the world. The indie game *Mr. Robot* is a mash-up of classic gameplay, puzzle-solving, and cute graphics wrapped inside an isometric adventure. Your mission, Asimov, is to rescue your ship from crazed robots. And hey, if you haven't laid hands on the developer's first game, *Starscape*, you should. Both are available at moonpod.com.



3 GAME NOIR

Graphic adventure gamers on the go owe it to

themselves to pick up *Hotel Dusk: Room 215* for the Nintendo DS. While not truly noir (but definitely borrowing shades of gray from *The Maltese Falcon*), *Hotel Dusk* is an awesome piece of interactive fiction, and demonstrates how adventure games are far from dead.

4 PSP, PLAYED

All right, there haven't been many reasons to blow the dust off our PSPs lately...but we went back and checked. We found a number of honest-to-god good games on the system. Need proof? *Ratchet and Clank: Size Matters* perfectly recreates the PS2 experience on a handheld. The humor, the firepower, and the gameplay are all amazingly intact.



5 CIVIL WAR

In the not-too-distant future, another civil war breaks out. The entire country is borked, but more than any other place, New York City is a war zone. The comic series *DMZ* follows one photojournalist as he wanders the bombed-out metropolis, caught between government troops and New Yorkers just trying to get by. Grab the first two graphic novels, which are out now.



6 VICE CITIES

Curious about junior jihadists in Pakistan? Hoping to someday see the steamy underbelly of Brazil? How about drinking with a pygmy tribe in the Congo? *The Vice Guide to Travel* is your essential DVD/book guide to some of the most screwed-up places on the planet. Kid friendly—if you want to scar him for life, that is.

7 WANNABE

Think you got what it takes to be a game designer? Microsoft is kick-starting a designers contest. Just download *XNA Game Studio Express* and get crackin'. There are many prizes on the road to glory (hardware and such) but the winner's stuff goes up on Xbox Live. Be sure to keep posted through the 1UP Network for updates on the Dream-Build-Play contest.

8 ROAD-READY

With the story of a father and son surviving in a postapocalyptic world, you don't exactly expect rays of sunshine. Cormac McCarthy's portrayal of this bleak cross-country journey in *The Road* is an amazing—and draining—read.

9 STEADY NOW, LADS

What you're about to hear is the perfect soundtrack to accompany an all-night bender. The Hold Steady's new album, *Boys and Girls in America*, is a must-have for the boozy, gravelly vocals of lead singer Craig Finn. His leery lyrics will leave you rocked and at the bottom of a bottle.



10 KNIGHTHOOD

Mick Jagger has it good. Too good. That's why a couple janitors, a bouncer, a cabbie, a waitress, and an intern are planning to rob the Rolling Stones. Huh? This "rob from the rich and give to themselves" goof is the plot for the ABC series *The Knights of Prosperity*. The show's loopy charm is watching these guys try to pull out all the stops as wannabe burglars plotting the heist.



PIPELINE

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Captain Blood	Playlogic
Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars	Electronic Arts
CSI: Hard Evidence	Ubisoft
Genesis Rising: The Universal Crusade	DreamCatcher
Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2	Ubisoft
Marine Sharpshooter III	Groove Games
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl	THQ
The Sacred Rings	DreamCatcher
Silent Hunter 4: Wolves of the Pacific	Ubisoft
Silverfall	Atari
Ancient Wars: Sparta	Playlogic
Titan Quest: Immortal Throne	THQ
TMNT: Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles	Ubisoft
APRIL 2007	PUBLISHER
Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway	Ubisoft
The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar	Midway
Monster Madness: Battle for Suburbia	SouthPeak Interactive
Resident Evil 4	Ubisoft
Seven Kingdoms: Conquest	Enlight Interactive
Storm of War: Battle of Britain	Ubisoft
MAY 2007	PUBLISHER
Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures	Eidos Interactive/Funcom
Alone in the Dark	Atari
Anarchy Online: Lost Eden	Funcom
Earache Extreme Metal Racing	Metro3D
Haze	Ubisoft
Interstellar Marines	Zero Point Software
Soccer Fury	NCsoft
Surrender? "Nuts!"	Kudosoft
Theseis	Track7
Two Worlds	SouthPeak Interactive
SPRING/SUMMER 2007	PUBLISHER
BioShock	2K Games
Call of Juarez	Ubisoft
Enemy Territory: Quake Wars	Activision
Frontlines: Fuel of War	THQ
Half-Life 2: Episode Two	Valve Software
Heart of Empire: Rome	Paradox Interactive
Kane & Lynch: Dead Men	Eidos Interactive
Shadowrun	Microsoft
Stranglehold	Midway

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WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Long known as *Unreal Tournament 2007*, Epic recently rechristened its baby *Unreal Tournament 3*. "We want to get back to what the game's really about: fast action and a futuristic setting," says lead producer Jeff Morris. "In *Unreal Tournament 2003*, the direction we were going was galactic WWF. That's where the 2003-2004 naming convention came from. We wanted to be able to do a new version every year. But *Madden* has a shifting roster and our fake sports teams weren't compelling enough."

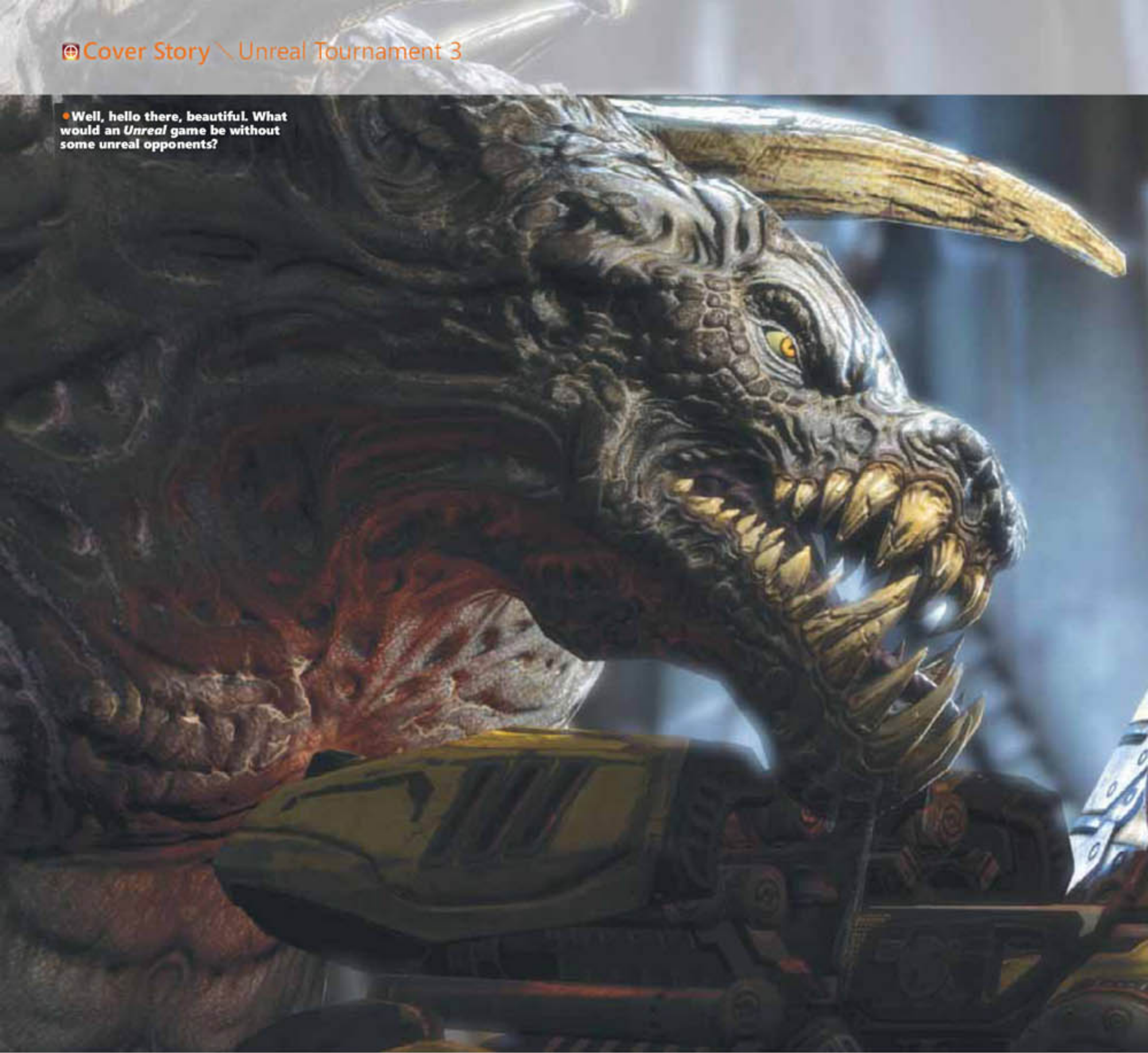
UNREAL TOURNAMENT

How one epic developer is creating its own competition BY ROBERT ASHLEY



UT3

• Well, hello there, beautiful. What would an *Unreal* game be without some unreal opponents?



HANDS-ON

⊕ **Cary, North Carolina.** This Disneyland of retail chains and obsessively manicured lawns is the home of Epic Games, creators of such sci-fi linebacker-with-a-gun hits as *Unreal Tournament* and *Gears of War*. And what better place for a fantasy factory than the artificial reality of a modern American suburb? Cary is the kind of imagineered town you can find exploding along the outskirts of every city in the country. Spotless prefab shopping complexes spring up at the intersections of streets wide enough for tank traffic. A Lowe's Home Improvement and a Home Depot face off across the street from each other like opposing capture-the-flag bases, forming an unofficial gate to corporate office parks beyond. There, hidden among the dense Carolina woods, is Epic's base.

The building itself is inconspicuous. The only hint of what lies inside is a cardboard stand-up of the

studio's Xbox 360 smash, *Gears of War*, peering out from behind the tinted glass—that, and a guillotine-like metal awning. Inside, the mood is triumphant. Epic's vice president, Mark Rein, shows me into his office, where, conveniently, he's gathered a few games created with Epic's Unreal Engine. He thumbs through them to find the one he's looking for. "You may have heard of this little game," he says, handing me a copy of *Gears of War*. Yeah, I may have.

Rein is all bluster, an unstoppable cheerleader for his team. His giddiness never wavers as we tour Epic's recently constructed facilities: a two-story suite of neutral-colored office spaces and a trophy motion-capture studio. "We could mo-cap an elephant in here if we wanted to," Rein says. But his mood—part postconquest Viking, part post-quarterly report executive—seems to have infected the entire Epic office. And why not? With 3 million copies of *Gears* in the bag and license fees pouring in from the incredibly popular Unreal Engine 3, the studio is booming. Which begs the question: Now

that *Gears* and Unreal Engine 3 are hits, is there any air left in the room for Epic's original sci-fi series, *Unreal Tournament*? Or is it competing with itself?

THE ENEMY WITHIN

"Competition isn't the right word," answers Steve Polge, *Unreal Tournament 3*'s lead designer. "Yes, *Gears of War* set a very high bar for us. But, through *Gears*, we started feeling more confidence as a studio." Polge is a nerd's nerd, a gangly teenager trapped in a grown man's body, introduced to me as "the creator of the infamous Reaper Bot in *Quake*." He has his finger in the *Unreal Tournament* pie at macro and micro levels, able to talk about the most mundane technical issues as easily as the bigger themes, something Epic is focusing on this time around. "We were always sure about our ability to do multiplayer, but not as much in our ability to tell a story," Polge says. Yes, *Unreal Tournament*, like its cinematic younger brother *Gears of War*, will now set out to tell a story. No, seriously.



“MORE THAN HALF THE
UT PLAYERS NEVER
PLAYED ONLINE.”

—JIM BROWN
LEAD LEVEL DESIGNER, EPIC GAMES

How, exactly, does a game created for the purpose of online competition end up focused on loner play? Apparently, multiplayer mayhem was never *Unreal's* big draw. “In our research, we found—through checking CD keys—that more than half of the players that buy the title never go online. They just play at home by themselves,” says Jim Brown, *UT3's* soft-spoken lead level designer. Their findings set the team to thinking about how they could improve upon the game's spartan, though apparently popular, single-player experience. “Starting with the original *UT*, you would go into deathmatch training, and there would just be a ladder system,” Brown says. “Get to the end and win a trophy. *Hurray....* The only story was that there's a tournament going on. Each installment was another season. *Wow....*” Replacing the old-fashioned ladder system will be a tree of branching paths and options, your progress determined not just by the outcome of the match, but by story-centric decisions made along the way.

INVASION OF THE SCI-FI JARGON

Of course, *Mortal Kombat* also has a story. It's hard to get a grip on exactly how involved the *UT3* narrative will be, especially given that the team is attempting to fashion something coherent out of the messy background filler of previous *Unreal* games. “*Unreal*, while we don't talk about backstory much, has a lot of story folded into it—all the races and stuff,” Polge says. Explaining the elaborate plot details of a sci-fi-themed computer game can make even the best efforts at plot sound like a conversation overheard in a comic book store, so I'll let Polge do it: “Although it is *Unreal Tournament*, the single-player campaign isn't really a tournament. The Necris interrupt the tournament. They were one of the important races in the original *UT*, but they've kind of gone away. Now they've come back with a bang, basically invading all the Tarydium-producing planets.”

The game takes place on one such planet (*Dork-tionary*: Taryd), a world divided by militarized

corporations in a constant battle for natural resources (*Dork-tionary*: Tarydium). Here's *Unreal's* big storytelling leap: You play as a single lead character, part of a military force from a mining clan wronged by the invaders (*Dork-tionary*: the Necris). So far, this guy doesn't have a name or a face, but he will be the nexus of an elaborate narrative. “You are a specific character, but we haven't got him built, so we're not ready to unveil him yet,” Polge says. And where previous games in the series encouraged the trading of team members, *UT3*, much like *Gears of War*, will have a perpetual cast of allies. “In past *UTs*, we basically let you pick who your teammates were,” Polge says. “But that kept us from really being able to develop the personalities of anyone on your team. They had different skills, but they had to be relatively generic because there were so many of them you could pick from. By having a smaller number of teammates, that allows us to focus a lot more on giving these guys some unique personalities.” >



That doesn't necessarily mean that *Unreal's* offline mode will play like *Gears*. "With *UT*, we're trying to have a really interesting story and interesting personalities on the same level that *Gears* did," Polge says. "But we're also trying to focus on providing a single-player game that has a lot more choice in terms of how you play it out, to make you feel like you're more in control." That's where the branching map comes into play. Instead of cruising down a predetermined path to victory, progress in *UT3* requires decision-making, a network of distinctive paths whose availability, according to Polge, "will be the result of past decisions you've made as well as the outcome of the current map. You'll be able to choose which branch you take next based on strategic trade-offs you are offered: the opportunity to steal some key technology from the Necris, or to force a particular enemy to surrender, or to take control

of a rich Tarydium mine to control the resources needed for a future offensive." Jeff Morris, *UT3's* long-haired and laid-back lead producer, is looking forward to one objective: "There's one mission where you need to sneak into Necris territory and steal their stealth technology. Once you carjack a Nightshade [a new Necris vehicle nobody has seen yet], you can retrofit your Hellbender vehicles with stealth."

Of course, this all plays out on the same maps used in the multiplayer game, in situations not unlike the traditional online game types. And while narrative is on the menu, it won't be interrupting the meat. "We plan to have short cinematic events in the single-player story to introduce new things," Polge says. "But we're not going to pull you out of the game. We'll have little cinematic 'umphs' here and there." Mostly, the game will consist of the same frantic action as online, but with competition courtesy of *Unreal's* famously feisty bots.

• Despite spending a whole day playing the game, we cannot wait for another shot at taking down a Darkwalker. These tentacled tanks are brutal! Maybe if we'd gotten our hands on some of the planned deployable weapons (mines, teleporters, and so on) that would've helped here.



THE ART OF WARFARE



While *Unreal Tournament 3* nixes the Onslaught and Assault modes from *UT 2004*, a big new team game fills the gap: Warfare. According to lead producer Jeff Morris, "We're doing a better job of making deathmatch skills relevant in a vehicular combat mode." How? The new mode centers around floating fuel cells called Power Orbs. With them, you play connect-the-dots, running quickly over power conduits in order to get to and blow up the opposing team's Power Core.

Power Orbs also energize various map-specific set pieces like drawbridges, mining facilities, weapon depots, and vehicle production facilities (like Nodes from Onslaught). Using these resources to your advantage, you then seek to take over enemy territory, gaining new facilities and Power Orbs along the way. It sounds simple, but Warfare will be extremely flexible, depending on the map and options selected. "For the players, once they understand the Orb mechanic, they understand the strategy for every level, rather than having to relearn the game for every level they play," says lead designer Steve Polge. "We're trying to abstract away unnecessary complexity."

KILLER ROBOTS FROM OUTER SPACE

Anyone who has ventured into the offline modes of previous *Unreal Tournament* games will tell you that, thanks to the game's notoriously challenging A.I., *UT* played offline pretty much like its online counterpart. "UT has always been known for having good bots and good A.I., and that's certainly something we're focusing on," Polge says. "We want them to feel as much like human players as possible. Our bots dynamically maintain their strategy based on what you're doing. You come up with strategies to win, and they come up with strategies to fight that. You get lots of cool emergent gameplay popping up." Morris pipes in, "Our A.I. is always trying to simulate a 13-year-old in Croatia who's using his high school's LAN. He's just going to exploit you."

Cool as that may sound, who needs A.I. when you have plenty of flesh-and-blood competition? I join the *Unreal* team for its daily playtest, a

few rounds of capture the flag. We fire up a map dotted by contemplative rock formations, a peaceful pond, feng shui, pan-Asian architecture, and about 20 tons of deadly firepower. Though the first thing I discover isn't deadly at all: a hoverboard, accessible at a keystroke, good for grabbing some virtual air.

"There is always a problem in any large-scale map where, through no fault of your own, you spawn in a location nowhere near the action," Morris says. "It looked good on the HUD, but you get there, and it is three minutes wasted walking." Everyone now gets a hoverboard, which will let you move two to three times faster than you can on foot, so you're always within a few seconds of something fun. It's part of *UT3*'s emphasis on fast action, which Morris sums up like this: "When you spawn in *Unreal*, you should have a destroyed vehicle cartwheeling over your head and two guys gunning for you—instant gratification."

Don't get any ideas about hoverboarding through a war zone, however. Besides not having access to your weapons while on the board, getting hit midhover extracts a stiff time penalty, as I quickly find out when a player on the rival team zaps me off my board. I lie on the ground for precious seconds, recovering, appropriately, like a skateboarder after a bad fall. Unlike a skateboarder, however, I'm finished off by a well-aimed rocket.

Respawning in the safe confines of my team's base, I decide to take a spin in something deadlier. Three of *UT3*'s brand-new Necris vehicles glisten on this showroom floor. The Necris rides are sleek and slithering, alive with organic animation. The Nemesis, a transforming tank—fast but weak when low to the ground, powerful but slow when reared up—travels along on distinctly snakelike treads. The Viper, a dangerously speedy jet bike, spreads a set of wings that turn its forward thrust into a quick burst of vertical climb. I decide, however, to go with >



• Massive combat as far as the eye can see? That's the battle plan for *UT3*'s Warfare mode. Notice in this screenshot how the Necris structures have a distinctly H.R. Geiger organic feel while, in the distance, high-tech towers trail away. Now, imagine this scene lit up like the Fourth of July with plasma bursts and exploding vehicles.



“WITH *UT3*, WE WANT TO CREATE A GOOD STORY—LIKE IN *GEARS OF WAR*.”

—STEVE POLGE,
LEAD DESIGNER, EPIC GAMES



• Just to give you an idea of the sense of scale here, that towering Darkwalker in the background is still a little ways off. The best way to battle it: Get in close—under the firing arc—and keep shooting.

the Darkwalker, a *War of the Worlds*-inspired heavy armored tank supported by a thicket of skinny robo-tentacles.

“At first, the legs were just something that the concept artist thought was really cool,” Morris says. “But the more we messed with it, the more we realized just how different legs are from treads. The Darkwalker is a great climber.” He points me toward a group of boulders, much too tall to jump over on foot. The walker nimbly shuffles across the rocks, creating its own little shortcut to the continuous melee in the center of the map, where I spot my prey: an Axon Goliath, the more traditional-style tank of *UT3*, distracted by an on-foot teammate.

The Goliath, like the other Axon-branded vehicles, is the opposite of the organic, slithering Necris equipment: sharp lines, industrial moving parts, and heavy steel. It's a theme that transfers over to the

weapons, which are now brimming with moving parts that wouldn't look out of place under the hood of a sports car.

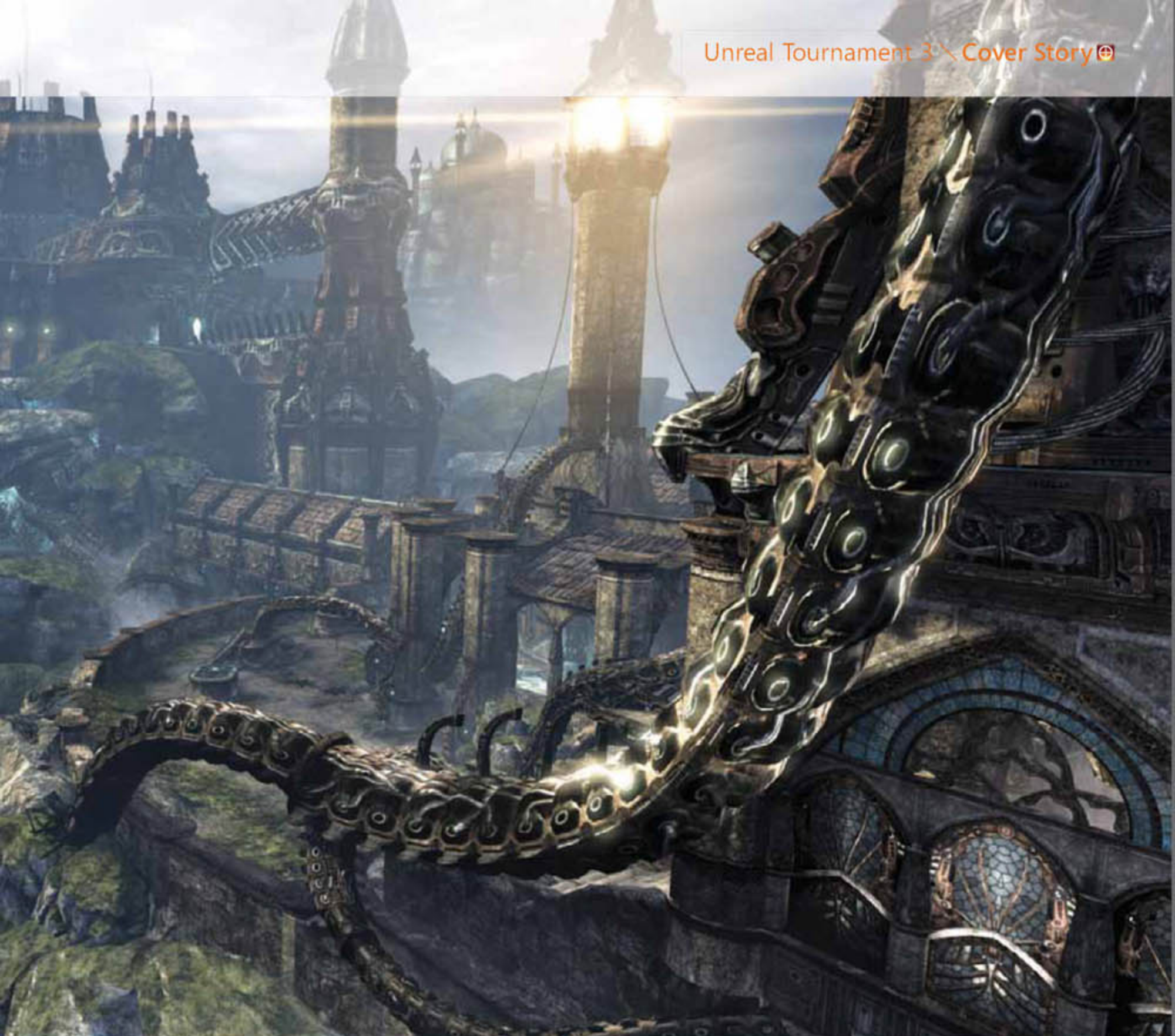
“Something we found with science fiction is that it's really liberating to just come up with whatever the hell you want,” Morris says. “But it can be really alienating to people who don't know what they're looking at. So, even though we do have these fantastical science-fiction settings, we want them to be derived from things people recognize.” Because of that, *UT3* has a more coherent style than its predecessors, which sometimes felt like a jumble of sci-fi tropes and clashing Halloween costumes.

Right now, however, I have the advantage of stealth in a tank-on-tank battle. I bring the Darkwalker down to a crouch, creeping behind the rocks. I round the corner and let loose a devastating dual beam. My opponent tries to

bring his turret around in time to return fire, but it's too late.

After thoroughly totaling the Goliath, I abandon my slow walker for the hoverboard and slip into the enemy base undetected—enough time to grab the flag and speed through open courtyard crossfire. Another teammate, this time piloting (barely) the zippy Necris Viper, swoops past. “Grapple on!” the driver yells from across the testing room. I aim and fire my grapple beam and hold on for dear life, land-skiing over the terrain at ridiculous speeds. Reaching home base, my teammate abandons the Viper into a wall at high speed using its “suicide” feature, a little victory destruction.

After the game, Morris and his team record bugs and complain about the things they didn't like. Someone speaks up about the grapple beam feature: “It's cool, but what's the point when most of the vehicles are slower than the hoverboard alone?” It's true. The only vehicle that really provides an exhilarating ride is the superfast Viper. Another team member plucks a clever solution out of thin air: “What if the grapple beam decapitates people?”



I mean, we've already got it working for the Manta [another classic *UT* vehicle—a hovercraft that, well...decapitates the opposition].” The team gives a collective “hell yeah,” laughing at the image of squads of hoverboarders decapitating unsuspecting schmucks. It’s the kind of lightbulb moment that every gamer has now and again, that great idea that would make a game so much better. Of course, *Unreal* is there to scratch that itch as well.

DO-IT-YOURSELF

“The editor is an easy-to-forget but crucial feature of *Unreal Tournament*,” Morris says. “We’re shipping all the tools that we used to create this content with the game so the ‘wouldn’t-it-be-neat-if’ people don’t have to go and learn C++.” As is tradition with *Unreal*, motivated types will get access to the actual tools Epic used to build its game. “I’ve worked on games where the editor is just a feature to sell the game, not actually used to make the game, and that never works. With our editor, since we have to deal with it daily, if there’s something obnoxious about it, we’re going to want it fixed.

By the time it gets to the customer’s hands, it’s a very usable, polished tool.” While level editors are nothing new, to the *Unreal* series or PC gaming in general, the editor in *UT3* gives armchair designers a new level of visual fidelity to work with.

“Creating art assets is a huge, huge investment now,” says lead level designer Jim Brown. “I used to be able to go into the engine and build a room myself, make it pretty and light it, do all that stuff.... Now, we’ve got a pistol that has more polygons in it than the entire level used to have. It’s a significant time investment. That’s why we take a very modular approach. Instead of building a building, we’ll build a wall, individual pillars, roof lines, and trims.... Then those tools also get flipped over to the community, and those guys can do the same things themselves without having to spend a year’s worth of time modeling and skinning. They can just use our pieces.” All those extremely detailed Lego pieces will, no doubt, make for hundreds of beautiful homemade levels, and they might actually land aspiring designers jobs. “That’s actually how I got my in into the industry,” says Brown. “I was

a modder, just at home working on *UT* maps and gaining popularity, and I got some work out of it.” Just then, we spot Polge riding a Razor scooter down the hall with his Blackberry stuck to the side of his face. “We’re too lazy to actually walk to each other’s offices,” Brown says.

Polge should be at play because *Unreal Tournament 3* is less a game than a giant box of toys. To play with those toys, the far-out weapons (even the old ones have new functions), the crash-bang, Hot Wheels vehicular manslaughter, the constant flow from one situation to the next, is to be fully in the simulated moment. Or, as Morris says: “My favorite way to think of it is, if somebody said, ‘Jeff, here’s \$20 million; go make your dream game,’ I’d make a multiplayer science-fiction shooter with vehicles.” ●

There’s more *Unreal Tournament 3* where that came from. Read hands-on reports and watch video interviews with Epic at gfw05.1up.com.



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LOVE HATE

The PC game industry paints a self-portrait

SPECIAL REPORT

 We invited a number of industry insiders to sound off on gaming's gray clouds and silver linings. "Love or hate, see it as an opportunity to address whatever's on your mind and at whatever length you'd like," we said. "Sky's the limit." Sixteen took us up on the offer. Here's what they had to say.

BY SHAWN ELLIOTT AND SEAN MOLLOY

Feature \ Love and Hate

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WARREN SPECTOR

Founder,
Junction Point Studios
System Shock, *Thief: The Dark Project*, *Deus Ex*

LOVE: Number One love [...] is the opportunity to work with some incredibly smart and talented people. I'm constantly amazed at the creativity and commitment of my peers and coworkers.

Number Two love, which is sort of "meta-

relevant" to gamers, is that I've had the opportunity to help shape a new medium of expression. That's an opportunity that [only] comes along a couple of times a century. How cool is that? For all the complaining we do—OK, that I do!—about how conservative this business is, there are lots of people pushing the medium forward. There are no solved problems in game development or game design. The state of the art is constantly changing and we all get to experience the birth of something new, as creators and players.

Number Three love, related to Number Two, is that we're all clueless. No one knows what they're doing. We're making it up as we go—from a design standpoint, a development process standpoint, a business model standpoint. You name it, we don't know it. It's scary, exciting, and amazing to be in a creative business like that. Complacency is not an option.

Number Four: As a player, I love experiencing stories rather than being told them. I'm just a geek about story! Of course, that leads to a hate [see Number Seven hate, below].

HATE: What do I hate about the game business? Start with the word "business."

Number One: I hate the fact that business considerations almost always trump creative considerations—and in a medium that reinvents itself constantly, that's criminal.

Number Two: I hate the fact that all of the money is concentrated in the hands of a few publishers, meaning all the power resides there, meaning all the decisions are made there. We desperately need alternate sources of financing and alternatives to the traditional boxed-game-at-retail approach to reaching consumers. Clearly the distribution equation is changing—with the MMO explosion, and Steam, GameTap, Xbox Live Arcade, Nintendo's Virtual Console, Manifesto Games, and others—but I want more and I want it now. And I've seen virtually no change in the way games get funded in over 20 years. I'm tired of waiting....

Number Three—related to Number Two...there seems to be a trend here: I hate the fact that there seems to be room in this business for giganto triple-A games and teeny indie games but not much in between. If you're stuck in the \$2 [million] to \$8 million development range, you're kind of in trouble—unlikely to be competitive with the 800-pound gorillas of the gaming world and too pricey to be profitable like the really low-budget stuff. Kind of a mess, really.

Number Four hate, which is relevant to everyone involved in gaming, is the lack of any kind of standards. One of the strengths of the PC platform is its flexibility. But that flexibility comes at a price—developers and publishers have

to support a mind-boggling array of hardware configurations, controllers, displays, soundcards, and so on. There are a bunch of reasons why consoles have stolen market share from the PC, but one of the key issues is the PC's lack of true "plug and play" capability. I'm daunted by the fine print on game boxes, by the hoops you have to jump through to *fail* to get a game to run. It's crazy. Someone has to solve this problem and I don't think it can be the developers. Maybe publishers. Maybe hardware manufacturers. Probably some combination of all of these.

Number Five hate—and this is all yours, gamers—is price point. Come on. We say we're a mainstream medium but we charge *how much* for our product? \$40? \$50? \$60? That's pathetic. All mainstream media—CD music, a night at the movies for two, a hardback book—cost about 20 bucks. If we want to be truly mainstream, we have to go after the \$20 bill people have in their wallets and stop overcharging for a niche product and crowing about how our revenue generation beats [that of] Hollywood.

Number Six hate is a big one: budgets! I remember my boss yelling at me for spending \$273,000 on my first game. It was budgeted at \$215,000! Now you spend more than that in a month. It's crazy. Competing in the triple-A game space on high-end PCs or next-gen consoles is a 10-, 20-, who-knows-how-many-million-dollar proposition. Putting all those pixels on the screen takes a ton of people and time. Team sizes and development schedules have mushroomed. Sure, some folks are making smaller games for smaller audiences, but it isn't the mainstream folks playing those games—and we're all about reaching larger, more mainstream audiences these days. Budget and audience considerations have *huge* ramifications for gaming, almost none of them good. Sure, the graphics are better, and it's cool when mainstream media come calling—who doesn't like talking to guys from *Rolling Stone* and *Newsweek* and the *Wall Street Journal*?—but the number of units you have to sell just to break even goes way up, along with the need to make games that will show well in TV commercials, and the risk tolerance of the folks with the money to support that kind of development budget goes way down. Lots of people decry the lack of originality in games—it's all sequels and licenses and stuff. That isn't being driven by the talent—there are lots of creative people in the game business who would love to do crazy, groundbreaking stuff. The problem is convincing someone to give you enough money to take a chance. And that bites.

Number Seven hate, and I hate this the most: All game stories are terrible. At our best, we probably reach the level of a bad summer blockbuster movie. I mean, we *have* to find a way to express ideas more compelling than "Hulk Smash!!!" And at our best, I guess we do surpass that. But I'd sure love it if I saw people trying to tell stories that didn't involve a) killing stuff, b) saving the world, c) saving a princess, d) killing more stuff, e) gathering coins, f) destroying the world! I mean, come on, the average age of gamers is going up all the time. Education level, too, I'm guessing. Surely there are people out there who want game stories about, oh, I don't know, relationships maybe? The human condition? Stuff like that.... I know there are games out there with serious intent and serious content but they don't tend to be the story-driven games. From a purely personal, story-obsessive's perspective, that's a real problem.

I'm not sure what it says about me or the business that I have more hates than loves, but there you have it. Overall, the loves still outweigh the hates for me—and if I didn't have something to complain about, no one would recognize me, so I guess I should be grateful there's so much that frustrates me!

It'll be interesting to see how peoples' lists of loves and hates changes over the next 10 years—'cause the one thing you can be sure of is that the games we played 10 years ago won't resemble in any significant way the stuff we're playing then. And that alone is reason to stay tuned.



TODD HOWARD

Executive Producer,
Bethesda Softworks
Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, Fallout 3

LOVE: Games for Windows. The PC industry needs standardization, and hardware support is only the start. I'll love it when Live comes to the PC, complete with Achievement points.

HATE: Tweaking each and every game to perform well on my PC. I just want to play, not tweak the

tech. To truly enjoy the best PC games, you must like messing with your config, and that's limiting the industry. I used to love putting mouse drivers into high memory to see how it affected performance, but those days are done.



CHRIS TAYLOR

Founder/Creative Director,
Gas Powered Games
Supreme Commander, Total Annihilation, Dungeon Siege

LOVE: I love where we've arrived. At long last, it puts us in the position to do the things we have been talking about for years. We have the tools, and over time and through technology, we've lost every excuse preventing us from making great games. Now we need to blow minds.

HATE: I'm not thrilled about the pace of our industry's progress over these past 10 years. We need to move much faster in going from an evolutionary model to a revolutionary one. We need to prioritize original concepts...and we need to sharpen our tools and processes; what worked a decade ago won't work going forward.



RAPHAËL COLANTONIO

CEO/Creative Director,
Arkane Studios
Dark Messiah of Might and Magic, The Crossing

LOVE: The pace of evolution in this industry is unparalleled. Movies evolved over the course of a century. Games have had 20 years. Imagine if the first film directors were alive and their latest work had to beat today's Hollywood blockbusters. It's both

fascinating and exhausting. Unlike other industries, we aren't really able to rely on our experience and our production processes aren't reusable in the long term. We're always struggling, adapting to new markets, technologies, and production methods. Long production cycles which

call for two to three years of inertia make it more challenging. The only survivors are agile and accept that their techniques are already obsolete as soon as they're invented.

Plus, the potential payoff is huge in that all it takes is one hit. How many industries have that potential? What's fascinating is that some games generate a fortune that nobody expected while others fail to recoup costs. Fascinatingly, and fortunately, there's no recipe. Finance and marketing people hope to find the Holy Grail formula for making hits, but it doesn't exist. This industry needs novelty, and that makes creative people important because we're the ones who come up with fresh game ideas and value-generating IP.

HATE: PC's decline as a gaming platform is depressing because it's the only one accessible to anybody who wants to be a developer. I'm fine with consoles taking their cut of every game sold, but I'm not fine with the idea that they control what games are and aren't made—it creates a barrier to creativity.



JEFF MORRIS

Producer, Epic Games, Inc.
Unreal Tournament 2004, Unreal Tournament 3

LOVE: I love the low entry barrier—there's no better way to test your ideas than to grab a freeware compiler and get building. Actually, an even quicker method is to take advantage of the toolsets available in other games to produce something playable in days, not months or years. In my mind, that ease of

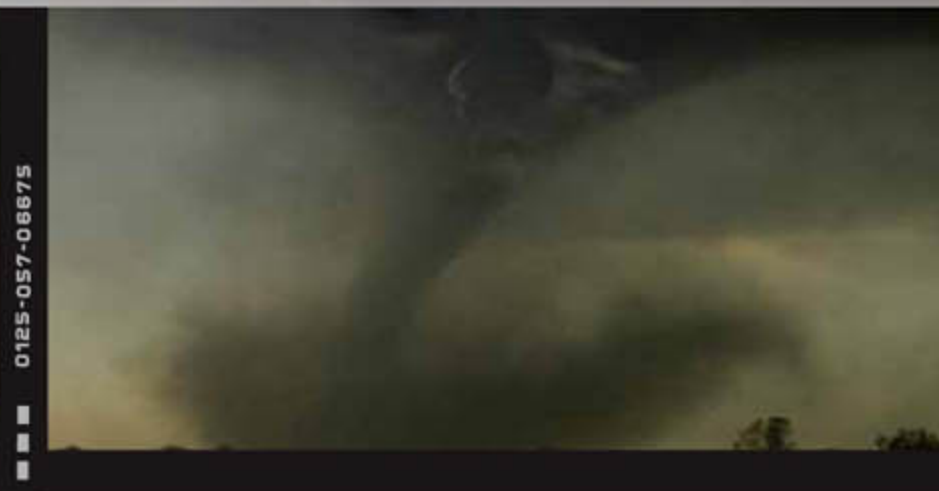
entry means that the PC will father innovation and remain relevant for the foreseeable future.

HATE: The death of 100,000-unit hits. Back when I started in this business, it was possible to build something solid in 18 months that sold 100,000 units—enough of a success to merit a sequel. That's an increasingly rare scenario, especially for boxed retail titles. The top-selling 10 percent of games make 90 percent of the money, and I'm missing those niche titles that explored obscure settings, complicated mechanics, and nontraditional narratives. Online distribution is stepping up, so while I haven't flexed my hardcore flight-sim muscle lately, I'm optimistic about the possibilities of good games that don't have huge mass appeal still landing on my hard drive. >

 "I HATE THE FACT THAT BUSINESS CONSIDERATIONS ALMOST ALWAYS TRUMP CREATIVE CONSIDERATIONS."

—WARREN SPECTOR, FOUNDER, JUNCTION POINT STUDIOS

Feature \ Love and Hate



BRAD MCQUAID

Executive Producer/Chairman/
CEO, Sigil Games Online
EverQuest, Vanguard: Saga of Heroes

LOVE: I love the combination of art and science. Massively multiplayer games make art matters all the more challenging because their environments should stay exciting for years as opposed to months.

HATE: No matter what planning and previous experience a developer has, projects always seem to

demand long, long hours. Losing time for one's life and family often takes the joy out of the creative component to making computer games.



BRAD WARDELL

President, Stardock Entertainment
Galactic Civilizations II

LOVE: I love interacting with the people who play the games we make. I have a developer's journal on galciv2.com where I post about what we've been working on. Only in the game industry can someone publicly post a good idea and be applauded when the developer integrates it into the game. If I'm producing automobiles and some-

one suggests adding windshield wipers to it, I'm not likely to get kudos for implementing that feature. But in the game industry, the customer can contribute to the team and I love that.

Independent developers let users see the sausage factory that is the game development process. We don't have customer relations representatives on our forums. We talk to the users directly. We'll agree with them on a feature or disagree [about] it; we'll get into lengthy debates on the nature of an alien race in one of our games or argue whether the explosion effects are "realistic" in another. Because I have no shame, I'm also open to shelving my own ideas if someone suggests better ones. *Galactic Civilizations'* starbase concept, which is blurbed on the front of the box, came from people posting on our forums. On another forum, I saw someone argue that races were all alike, and that it would be better if each one had a "super ability," so we put super abilities in *Galactic Civilizations II: Dark Avatar*. What other industry works this way?

HATE: Marketing. Other industries have their share of hype, but with PC gaming, hype and developer worship significantly affect sales. Have a great new game? Too bad, because some level designer who worked on a famous 3D shooter has an idea he's sketched out on a napkin and *Game Player Magazine* has bumped the little half-page mention of your game so that they can write a three-page preview of his. Marketing is an art form. The ability to get coverage, to generate "buzz," and to build momentum is a rare talent. And because that coverage and momentum determine the success or failure of a game as much as the quality of the game, it can be unnerving. And secondly, no game developer gets groupies. What's with that?



DONALD MUSTARD

Creative Director,
Chair Entertainment Group
Advent Rising, Empire, Undertow

LOVE: Emerging digital distribution is exciting. I love the try-before-you-buy opportunity that downloadable games present for developers and gamers, and what we've seen so far on Xbox Live Arcade only begins to demonstrate the potential possible. XBLA in particular presents an awesome dichotomy in that it limits

the size of your game while giving you access to the Xbox 360's full power. It forces developers to focus on "pure" concepts and distill ideas down to their core components. I personally want a side-scroller that plays like *Metroid Zero* and looks as gorgeous as *Gears of War*. I love that this format offers the opportunity to independently produce games faster and with more creative control and [profit] than we get out of traditional publishing models.



LAURA HEEB MUSTARD

Videogame publicist

HATE: I'm disappointed about president Doug Lowenstein's departure from the Entertainment Software Association. Over the past 12 years he has shouldered tremendous political heat for our industry, while providing an articulate voice on everything from protecting our First Amendment rights to enforcing copyright laws that protect our work.

I only hope that his replacement is up to the task and can continue the positive momentum he created. On a related note, I am happy to see that judges in several states have been cracking down on agenda-pushing politicians who continue to exploit our industry and attempt to infringe on our rights for their own political gain. I hope we continue to fight back until they understand that introducing unconstitutional legislation against videogames is only a waste of taxpayer time and money.

"INDEPENDENT GAME DEVELOPERS LET USERS SEE THE SAUSAGE FACTORY."

—BRAD WARDELL, PRESIDENT,
STARDOCK ENTERTAINMENT



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VIKTOR ANTONOV

Art Director/Concept Designer/Writer, Arkane Studios
Half-Life 2,
The Crossing

LOVE: I love the medium's magic unpredictability. In painting and cinema, artists have very high control in that the final product is one painting or one movie. Real-time games vary every

time you enter a level. Once I design an environment, I know what most viewpoints on the player path will look like, but I'm never certain what form the experience will take since, like jazz improvisation, there are endless variations and possibilities. If a design concept is well executed, it will come alive in a way that's always surprising and sometimes overwhelming to the designer.

Another thing I love is that games are a great vehicle for reviving science fiction, which Hollywood has largely forgotten over the past few years.

HATE: ...lack of creative risk-taking and weak risk management by both developers and publishers, but I'll address issues more specific to art and design direction. Visual design in videogames is undervalued. I'd rather use the term "visual design" than the vague "art." By graphics I refer to something different: the technical part of game visuals, like engine, lighting, shaders, and so on.

Some misconception and confusion still surrounds the exact meaning of terms such as "game art" and "graphics," as well as their functions in a game. Many development teams and project leads consider game art to be a presentation package for content, a sort of pretty box that should help sales. This leads to poorly defined objectives and lack of focus for the art teams. Of course, pleasing aesthetics are important, new shaders too, but praiseworthy visual design should accomplish much more than that. Here are examples:

- Visuals serve to build a sense of believability. Even very stylized games feel real with the right internal logic and consistency—it makes every event

in the game matter much more. Achieving realism is a complicated and selective process for art departments and it definitely has nothing to do with "photo-realism."

- The visuals in a scene should enhance and compliment the experience. One example could be foreshadowing danger by creating menacing, backlit building silhouettes, or the opposite: playing visuals "against the grain" by using a romantic setting as a backdrop for a horror situation to create contrast.

- The game world is a powerful tool for providing information. An environment, with its architecture and props, tells us a great deal about what went down prior to the player's appearance. This makes for subtler, more sophisticated narration while replacing flat exposition and voiceovers.

- Images on the monitor should maintain players' interest. Simple physiology says that contrast stimulates the pupil, and clever use of lights and darks can make information easier to classify. Contrast also helps underline levels of intensity, and if it's truly successful, visual design can "hypnotize" players to a degree, make us move in a certain direction without artificially constraining the path.

Another unfortunate assumption I've run into again and again is that gameplay and art are experienced as two separate elements. I hope future production cycles include longer design phases and better budgets for blending story, visuals, and gameplay in a seamless experience, as opposed to a patchwork of features, puzzles, and vistas.

Game critics' terminology is similarly confused. While some magazines have started differentiating "art direction" and "graphics," others still consider everything from rendering technologies to visual design "graphics." I'm looking forward to the day when engines are sufficiently stable and development teams can focus more on gameplay and storytelling rather than showcasing tools and tech features. Hopefully then [the] BBC and CNN websites will move their gaming articles from the technology section to the entertainment one. >

 "[I HATE] TWEAKING EACH AND EVERY GAME TO PERFORM WELL ON MY PC. I JUST WANT TO PLAY."

—TODD HOWARD, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, BETHESDA SOFTWORKS



"I WANT TO HELP MAKE THE FIRST VIDEOGAME THAT MAKES YOU S*** YOURSELF."

—RANDY PITCHFORD, PRESIDENT, GEARBOX SOFTWARE



MICHAEL WILSON

CEO, Gamecock Media
Max Payne, Serious Sam: The First Encounter

LOVE: That Hollywood wants to be the games business. Just a few short years ago, the games business was taking all [its] cues and ideas from Hollywood. Pretty much from the point that 3D gaming became the norm, the games industry realized it could create compelling, immer-

sive, and previously impossible experiences—but rather than think up original ideas, most aped movies. Everything from plotlines, dialogue, perspectives, genres—hell, even marketing materials like trailers and print ads were straight-up rip-offs.

But now the tables have turned. The gaming industry is creating the most exciting entertainment experiences, and Hollywood is waking up to the fact that it can't compete directly because the experiences are essentially different—they're passive entertainment; we're interactive. So now it's them ripping us off. They make gaming-based movies; they viral market to create the illusion of interactivity. Every film is desperate to get licensed as a game, and their plots and releases are much more experimental.

HATE: That the games business is turning into Hollywood. With success comes investors, and with that comes bureaucracy to keep the money rolling in. Then you get games based on study groups and proven formulas, because better to make money on *Action Game 5* than take a shot at *Crazy Game 1*. If you look at any entertainment industry that gets to this point—where fiscal concerns lord over creativity—that's the exact point where the people start looking somewhere else.

People love videogames because they continually give us new experiences, but lately all we're doing is repeating ourselves. If we don't loosen up, take some risks, and have some fun, something else will come along and steal our thunder.

ALEX SEROPIAN

Founder, Wideload Games
Stubbs the Zombie in Rebel Without a Pulse, Halo, Myth

LOVE: [I love] all of the opportunity. Games continue to become more and more mainstream and an ever-increasing number of distribution channels and game-playing hardware devices are available to consumers, giving us independent developers plenty of places to

ship games. Along with the increasing demand for content seems to come an increasing demand for original games, which is of particular interest to me. I truly believe this is an absolutely great time to be a game developer.



GARY CHAMBERS

Developer, Introversion
DEFCON, Darwinia, Uplink

LOVE: Videogames have the potential to become the most compelling and engaging form of entertainment ever created, from simple puzzles to vast, epic stories that take days to play through. They can evoke deep emotional responses or simply be a way to pass the time during lunch or on the bus.

Videogame communities are quite

unique, whether they are formed around a single game or the love of games in general. They are capable of great things, from vast modifications and expansions to games, to tremendous charity work such as Penny Arcade's Child's Play, which last year raised over \$1 million in toys and donations for children's hospitals all over the world.

HATE: I don't like the amount of money that gets poured into a modern title. Companies have become so consumed by creating the best graphics that every other aspect of their games suffers. Games become shorter as it takes more time to develop content, and they become more and more expensive, causing publishers to take [fewer] risks on new, creative ideas. And, because of the vast amounts of money required to create the kind of graphics that get the gaming press to stand up and take notice, the smaller developers out there who are trying new things find it very hard to get the attention they deserve.

There have been a number of positive steps recently, however, such as the scaling down of E3 from an event where the amount of coverage you get is proportional to the amount of money you spend making your booth big and flashy to a more structured event where your coverage is dependant on the merits of your game.

EA also announced in recent months their plan to start developing unique titles with smaller budgets, which is a heartening thing to see from a company with so much power to effect change. Let's hope that they can pull it off.

RANDY PITCHFORD

President, Gearbox Software
Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway

LOVE: The industry's present scope and future potential motivate me. When I first programmed games 20 to 25 years ago, there was neither an accessible market nor much money in it. Today's world is wired. We've consistently grown over the past couple of decades and we're now an entrenched part of popular culture.

Still, we've only started. We're probably sitting at less than 50 percent saturation right now—saturation being about what percentage of the population "could" be customers. The other half—the unsaturated half—just doesn't play games and probably never will. Older generations are out of the equation.

Fortunately, and this is going to sound really rough, old people get older and eventually go away. Meanwhile, what we're seeing is that all—and I mean pretty much all—new people play videogames. One study suggests that 95 percent of





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school-age children choose videogames as their favorite form of entertainment, with the remaining 5 percent picking movies, television, music, or literature.

So for us gamers who get it, it's not surprising. We're going to keep growing as an industry until we hit holodeck- or *Matrix*-level immersion. Of course, once we have holodecks, we'll have to make software for [them].... Think *Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway* looks real? Wait until your brain thinks you're actually there because it's wired into some sort of VR system. You'd believe you're in Operation Market Garden, and most of us would s*** ourselves straight away. We've yammered for years about making the game that will make you cry. I honestly think we've hit that goal, so here's a new one: I want to help make the first videogame that makes you s*** yourself.

Another interesting thing to think about is that we're only penetrating developed populations that are already part of our electronic lifestyle. The games industry will grow with globalization. We're currently happy when one console manufacturer breaks the 100-million-unit mark with installed hardware. According to the 2006 CIA *World Factbook*, there are over 6.5 billion people in the world. I look at that and think that we've still got at least one order of magnitude of growth in front of us. Anyone want to help me later with technology for a networked game that supports over a billion clients?

HATE: That we're in the middle of the largest generation gap in the history of the world is a huge threat. Anecdotes about the generation gap between baby boomers and their rock 'n' roll-hating parents abound. I mean, while much of the World War II generation objected to rock 'n' roll's meaning, they at least understood what music was and that there was joy and art and entertainment in it. Today's situation is totally different. Older generations have no idea what a videogame is—they've never played any videogame of any kind, and it's horrifying to them in that they imagine these things are just infinite evil simulators where gamers get into virtual situations to explore and practice behavior that is totally unacceptable in real life. They have zero frame of reference with respect to videogames, and they see zero value in videogaming. It's a generational war, and it's a good thing we're on the side that's going to win.



LARS GUSTAVSSON

Creative Director, (DICE)
Battlefield 1942, Battlefield 2

LOVE: So much still hasn't been done and the possibilities are definitely not diminishing. Every day introduces new angles and ideas on how to entertain or even teach, new audiences within different age groups and territories, interesting blends between genres, constantly improved hardware capacity.

Neither gamemakers nor players can fully grasp the future—guess it's like when Leonardo da Vinci talked about making helicopters when a traditional telephone would've amazed the world.

HATE: While today's games look "good enough" and sound "good enough," we must accomplish much more before we can truly claim that we're taking full advantage of our fairly new medium. I don't want to diminish the impact of those two components but rather to regard them as we would set design and soundtracks. Far too many movies are made nowadays with excellent effects and audio, whereas the script, or should we say design, would fit on a napkin. Given that you start with a great script, you can enhance the experience with visuals, but you're less likely to succeed with it the other way around.

Games are expensive to produce and I guess that puts pressure on the industry to stray from revolution and stick to the safety of evolution. The beauty of early generations of games was that design was the be-all and end-all. Together, we'll rectify this. If we don't dare, who will?



BILL ROPER

CEO, Flagship Studios
Hellgate: London, Mythos

LOVE: There has been a huge resurgence in the creation, distribution, and viability of small games. These are usually put into the category of "casual" games, but as anyone who's played *Puzzle Pirates* or *Bookworm Adventures* can tell you, they'll suck you in just like any triple-A title. These are games that have a simple vision, are executed very well, and

are done so in a way that is accessible, friendly, and easy to learn. Then these games are distributed directly to gamers via the Internet, providing a very intimate relationship between the creators and their audience. This makes for better ongoing content and allows designers to have firsthand insight into what their players want, how they want to get it, and how they want to purchase it.

The teams that create these games can be small—especially by triple-A and console-team standards—which I believe always makes for a tighter game and a healthier company. This also means that they can have a player base which numbers in the tens of thousands and be very healthy, as opposed to needing hundreds of thousands to break even. The monetary risks are lower, the games more inventive, and the development time is much less. With everyone from Yahoo and Google to Microsoft and Turner Broadcasting getting into the act, we are really starting to see a marketplace that has something for everyone, no matter what kind of play experience you're looking for.

HATE: On the other side of the coin are the huge blockbuster titles that definitely drive the industry. And while the dedication and passion for designing a truly great game is there amongst the vast majority of development teams, the more resources—and money is not the least [of] them—are required. For the biggest titles, this is on the order of tens of millions of dollars. And in an extremely competitive marketplace, companies that provide this funding look for any and every way to hedge their bets. It becomes less about making a great game and more about making a game that can turn a profit.

Gamers have been bemoaning sequels and licensed games for years, generally because they simply aren't all that great. Don't get me wrong—there are some very notable exceptions. But who doesn't cringe when they see some TV show from the '70s or '80s gaining "new life" as a game? The big publishers need to follow the film industry's lead in one important way: distribution arms to get "independent" games to the masses. Where is our New Line, Sony Pictures Classics, Fox Searchlight, or Miramax? These companies have all had major critical and commercial successes and have been instrumental in pushing the boundaries and artistic standards of film. The gaming industry has taken the entertainment lead in distributing games directly to our audiences. Now it needs the same pioneering support from its biggest publishers to keep innovation moving forward. ●

The discussion doesn't stop at the end of the article. Read more insider thoughts on the state of the industry at lovehate.1UP.com.

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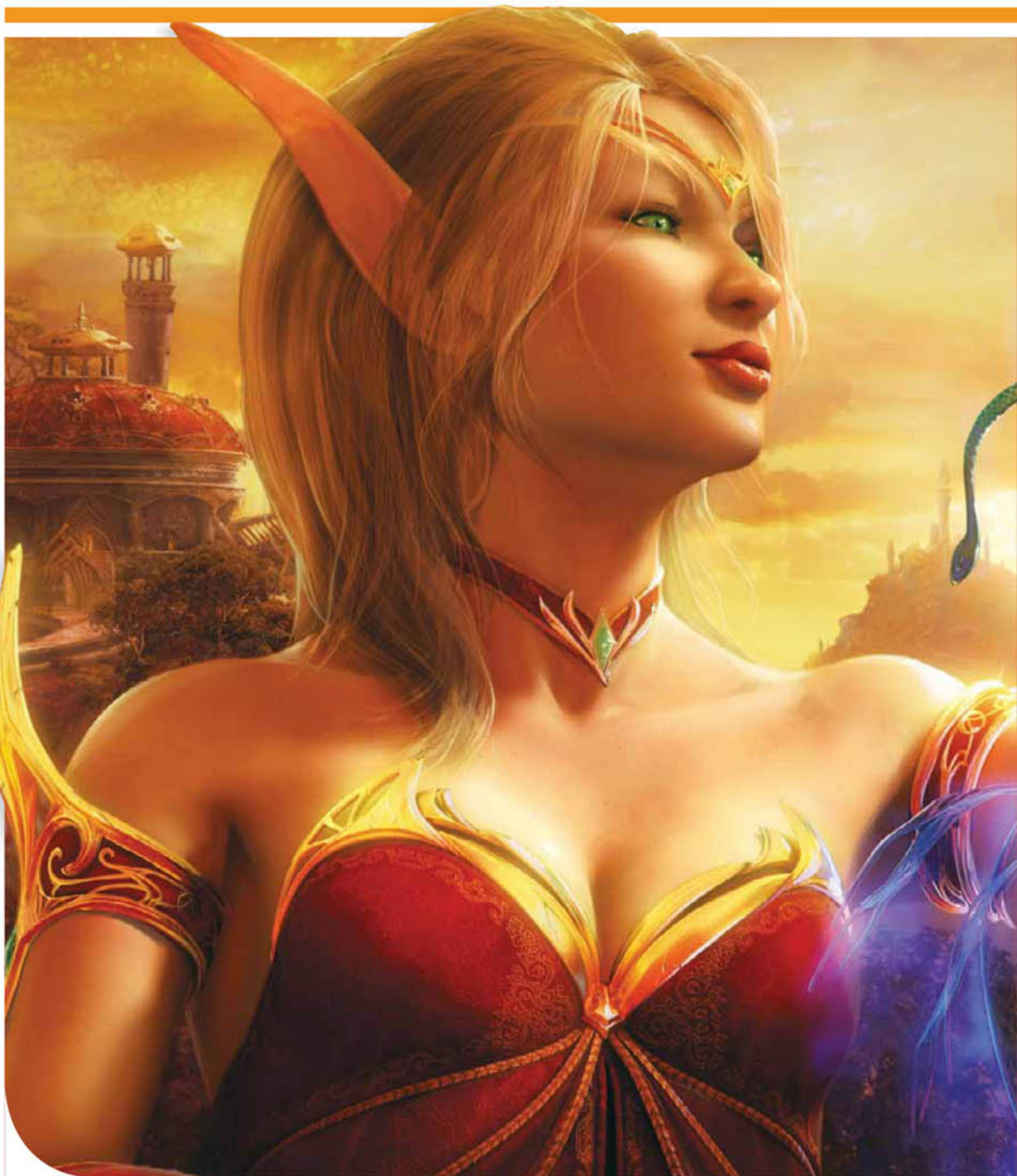
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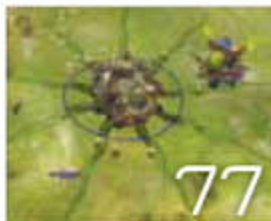


STAB

Titan Quest: Immortal Throne

The expansion to everyone's favorite *Diablo* clone arrives.

75



SHOOT

Maelstrom

Every RTS ever—rolled into one.

77



DESTROY

Supreme Commander

Is it supremely good? Or is it supremely disappointing?

78



THIS MONTH IN REVIEWS...

Y **Love it or hate it,** *World of Warcraft* is a game that cannot be ignored, especially in light of its first expansion's unbelievable sales. *The Burning Crusade* pushed 2.4 million copies worldwide in its first 24 hours at retail—with gamers lined up by the hundreds, eager to take advantage of midnight sales. My hometown of Sunnyvale, CA, was the site of Blizzard's official launch event: Over 1,000 *WOW* fanatics lined up at the local Fry's Electronics to snag *Burning Crusade* collectors' edition boxes and *WOW* developer autographs. One friend of mine bought *two* collectors' editions—one for himself, one for eBay. I laughed at him.

But now, even *I'm* playing *WOW*, no longer able to ignore the massive impact it's made on the culture of PC gaming. This revelation no doubt comes as a shock to longtime readers and loyal GFW Radio podcast listeners who know me as a vocal anti-*WOW* fanatic, but I've nevertheless decided to give it the benefit of the doubt *one* more time. So, if you play on Deathwing, say hello to Ogrot, my Tauren hunter. Bonus points for anyone who gets the dopey geek reference! • **Ryan Scott, Reviews Editor**

SCORE KEY

GFW uses a 10-point scoring scale to inform you, at a glance, whether or not a game is worth your hard-earned money. We strictly enforce a score of 5 as the median, meaning that any game receiving a score of 6+ is certainly worth playing—at least to some extent. Here's how the numbers break down:



Editors' Choice award

Any game scoring a 9 or higher receives a GFW Editors' Choice award, signifying the very best in PC gaming.

9-10: Excellent

Genre benchmarks—universally recommended.

7-8.5: Good

Enjoyable throughout, with minor flaws.

5-6.5: Average

Status quo. Only genre enthusiasts need apply.

3-4.5: Bad

Significant bugs or fundamental design issues.

0-2.5: Terrible

Never should have been made.



• The common cold won't bring these tripods down.



• One of the most compelling new factions is the Consortium—suave, cutthroat “businessmen” of the spirit trade.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT: THE BURNING CRUSADE

You can't go home again

PUBLISHER: **Blizzard Entertainment** DEVELOPER: **Blizzard Entertainment** GENRE: **MMORPG** AVAILABILITY: **Retail, Download (www.worldofwarcraft.com)** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **800MHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 10GB hard drive space, World of WarCraft MULTIPLAYER: Massive-scale VERSION REVIEWED: Retail v2.0.6**



REVIEW



Most games are static; MMOs are epochal. The *World* I once knew—the *World* that set a million lives on the road to ruin in November of 2004—died sometime around April of 2005. A sea change swallowed up the golden !s and ?s, replacing them with Scholomance pick-up groups, Emperor runs, and icy phrases like “my six-item tier zero set bonus.” That second game died several months later, supplanted by one of resistance-gear farming and strenuous raid encounters that stopped just short of requiring on-the-fly calculus. Group dynamics, guilds, and military coordination—ideas that barely existed in the November 2004 incarnation of *World of WarCraft*—suddenly revealed themselves to be the very core of Blizzard’s MMO to end all MMOs. “Life begins at level 60,” the message boards warned—and they weren’t kidding.

In January 2007, that third game died, too—sucked away through a big swirly green aperture and off into the twisting nether.

REBIRTH (RANK 4)

The Burning Crusade is more of a resurrection than an expansion, a vast and munificent span of content that both refines and totally invalidates what came before it. Similarities abound—*BC*’s certainly “more of the same,” with extra nicotine, less tar, and a bonus pinch of crack cocaine—and the differences are all functions of Blizzard’s own experience curve: *BC*’s “XP grind” undergoes such scientific refinement that you can practically see the equations and spreadsheets in your quest log. The leveling pace fits tightly to the content, and quests yield far greater XP rewards than simple blind slaughtering (even more so than before—Hunters complain of out-leveling their favorite pets too quickly), so reaching level 70 means never having to mindlessly kill monsters simply for the purple numbers that pop up over their heads. Quests are bountiful (each of the new Outland continent’s seven giant zones features upward of 40), and the new areas’ size rivals some other MMOs’ base games. You can niggle about a bug here or a glitch there...but on the whole, *BC* is phenomenally polished.

“Kill 20” and “collect 10” quests still make up the norm, but they’re more frequently accompa-

nied with a twist and some flair—use those 20 skulls to summon an enormous undead drake, who swoops in from the other side of the zone (folks on flying mounts might even pass him in the sky) after a dazzling display of violet fireworks. Slaughter an enormous herd animal, and an even more enormous sandworm explodes from underground, *Dune* style (complete with Dib’Muad’s Crysknife as a quest reward), to consume it.

That’s not to say *BC*’s some sort of grind-free MMO miracle—not at all. Blizzard simply removed the grind from the leveling process and dropped it into the end-game Reputation farming, as evidenced by the multitude of faction-specific quartermasters (vendors carrying high-end gear, only available to characters who earn adequate Reputation with that faction—by turning in 1,000 jackalope nostrils, for example) populating the land. While the original *WOW* only dabbled in the notion of Reputation as an endgame advancement path, *BC* practically revels in it. Faction isn’t just used for raid gear, either—it’s also necessary to access the heroic (i.e., “harder”) versions of *BC*’s instanced dungeons.

The new instances wisely follow the “winged” model of old favorites such as Dire Maul and Scarlet Monastery, split into subsections that take about two hours apiece to clear; shed no tears for the death of the five-hour Blackrock Depths crawl. Early instances such as Hellfire Ramparts and the Underbog are pretty much a breeze for anyone used to *WOW*’s endgame non-raid instances, but a clear turning point comes at around level 65, when you enter Auchindoun’s wicked and unforgiving Mana-Tombs. Populated by the “ethereals” (a new race of profiteering energy mummies who day-trade souls instead of shares), the Tombs require the kind of class coordination and party cooperation typically reserved for raids. Its bosses—and those that come after—present brilliant, collaborative fantasy math puzzles that require lightning wit.

INADEQUACY ISSUES

BC’s predominantly geared toward post-60 life in Outland, but it also drops in two new races—the Blood Elves and the Draenei—for those who enjoy *WOW*’s early-game innocence. Both races populate beautiful newbie zones (though early-game progression barely differs from any of *WOW*’s original races), and both succeed at making your pre-*BC* characters feel inadequate and downright primitive. Their stories are richer >

COLLECT ‘EM ALL



Even if you purchased it simply for the in-game pet, it’s worth digging into the collector’s edition of *Burning Crusade*. While the excellent art book (with art worth looking at) and Outland map mouse pad are swell,

the winners are the beautiful, atmospheric (although incomplete) soundtrack and the behind-the-scenes DVD—the latter of which contains a must-watch collection of fascinating BlizzCon panels that help you appreciate the game even more. Honest!



 YOU CAN PRACTICALLY SEE THE EQUATIONS AND SPREADSHEETS IN YOUR QUEST LOG.



<Power Word: Shield> fades
<Rain of Chans> fades

• The new post-60 skills and spells aren't just filler. You'll quickly wonder how you ever lived without the Priest's Shadow Word: Death or the Warrior's Spell Reflection.



• Not shown: two tiny twin fairy priestesses who speak at the same time.



• "I crossed vast dimensional rifts and consorted with demigods for these reinforced mail boots."



• Items from factions like the Sha'tar require Reputation or special "soulbound" trade-ins instead of cash—Blizzard's bid to fight gold farmers?

and stranger...and their racial abilities are, quite frankly, unfair. The Draenei abide in an enormous interdimensional spaceship (part of a much larger interdimensional spaceship that serves as one of BC's final dungeon series) that crashed into WOW's world of Azeroth and mutated the land

with shattered mobility crystals. They hang out with glyph-gods from The Beyond that sing pure joy into the hearts of men, and simply being around any ol' Draenei's "heroic aura" improves other players' abilities. The Blood Elves enjoy similar sophistication and are able to suck mana from living things and spontaneously weaponize it, refilling their own magic bar and squelching nearby spellcasters. Old Azeroth's Trolls? They wear bones in their hair and are slightly better at throwing things.

But the strange science fiction/fantasy blend serves WOW well, and BC surprises with its compelling story. While WOW always makes it easy to worry about the "how" (bring me 15 bat faces!), BC puts forth a strong case for finally caring about the "why." Despite the comparatively primitive presentation—no cut-scenes, no lip-synched acting...just yellow boxes of text to read—I find myself reading every quest, stopping for every book, and chatting with everyone who offers me a dialogue balloon.

If the original WOW hypothesized that art direction trumps technical prowess, two years later, BC proves it. Weirder and wilder than Azeroth's occasionally drab environs (sorry, but Desolace, Tanaris, and the Badlands were a bore), Outland's architecture, flora, and fauna invoke oohs, ahhs, and OMGs. Walk past the bog giants and fen striders of Zangarmarsh, fly over the porcupine-quill mountains of Blade's Edge, and

witness the power of a well-wrought shape and a carefully chosen color palette.

EVIDENCE OF THE OLD WORLD

Burning Crusade is characterized as much by what's new as by what's not: As lovely as Terrokar Forest looks, familiarity is anathema to an alien world...and the illusion breaks just a little when you enter a town and realize the inn, tower, and tavern are just rubber stamps of the ones in old Azeroth, or when you encounter yet another old-world wolf among the warp stalkers, strange moths, and other new creatures. But despite this and all the other things BC didn't add, but could have—no new classes, no "hero classes," no fourth talent trees, no guild halls or player housing zones—Blizzard's savant still feels more complete than any other MMO out there.

On November 23, 2004, I declared to anyone who'd listen that from that day forward, WOW was the only game I'd ever need. Today, that claim is still 100 percent valid. •Sean Molloy

CAVERNS OF TIME



Old Azeroth isn't completely pointless for post-60 characters. It hosts one of *Burning Crusade's* most interesting instance series, the Caverns of Time—which shove your party back in history to key points in *WarCraft's* past as you try to prevent some meddling dragonfolk from messing with the flow of time. The first encounter, which has you ensuring Thrall's successful escape from Durnhold, is absolutely frantic—and quite possibly BC's most entertaining instance.

VERDICT

➤ Unique art direction; fascinating new races; brilliant instances; more of the same.

❑ Too many reused models; leveling to 70 is quick and easy; more of the same.





PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: Iron Lore GENRE: Action-RPG AVAILABILITY: Retail ESRB RATING: Teen
 MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.8GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 5GB hard drive space, Titan Quest MULTIPLAYER: 2-6 players VERSION REVIEWED: Near-Final Reviewable

REVIEW



To paraphrase a famous quote, I don't know if I can define "good gameplay," but I know it when I see it. And in 2006, I saw it for many, many late-night, eye-bleeding hours in Iron Lore's ridiculously addictive *Titan Quest*—an action-RPG that, like many games before it, stole blatantly from *Diablo II*...but unlike the others, *Titan Quest* utterly nailed that same elusive, indefinable magic groove that made *D2* a classic. Put another way, *Titan Quest* was the first *Diablo* clone that deserved to *not* be labeled that way.

Now Iron Lore returns with *Immortal Throne*, the first *TQ* expansion pack, and it's an essential addition—both to vets and to new players—fixing nearly everything that needed fixing in the original game, while adding a buttload of new content. Nothing here is mind-blowingly original for the genre...but, once again, all the smart choices, cool options, and creative little touches prove that the developers know exactly what they're doing.



I WENT FROM BORED MILLIONAIRE TO DESPERATE PAUPER—AND THAT'S A GOOD THING.

UNDERWORLD DREAMS

Immortal Throne picks up just seconds after you've killed *TQ*'s final boss, Typhon, up in Olympus. Now, for the expansion's new fourth act, you descend to Rhodes...only to discover—shockingly!—that the threat of the angry Titans isn't over, and that you must head toward the Underworld and face off against the Lord of the Dead, "Don't Call Me Diablo" Hades himself. Along the way, you traverse eight humongous maps filled with loot-toting monsters and a couple dozen side quests that should keep you busy for a good 15 hours or so (or more, if you suck as much as I do).

The new act is fine...but the real appeal of *Immortal Throne* comes from all the cool things added to the base game. The big one is the new skill tab, Dream Mastery, a kick-ass combination of magic damage, pet summoning, and restoration.

HILL AND BE KILLED

Here's the final tally for Mougins, my level 40 Conqueror, after making it through both *Titan Quest* and *Immortal Throne*:

Time played: 76 hours

Monsters killed: 21,679

Times killed: 222

It's so good that, after finishing the expansion with my melee-only Conqueror dude, I felt compelled to start the entire game over just to bathe in its awesomeness. (It's also so good that a nerf seems almost inevitable once fans start whining).

Best of all: the new ways to spend money and manage loot—by far the original game's biggest shortcoming. The original *TQ* gave out too much gold and not enough stuff to spend it on; now the choices are plentiful, and tie directly into gameplay, adding yet more strategic decision-making to the mix. Do you spend it all on powerful one-shot scrolls, which are now nearly essential to beating the game's almost unfairly tough boss monsters? Or do you save up to buy the new artifacts, which can add extremely powerful—and necessary—bonuses and resistances? By the time I hit *Immortal Throne*'s final boss, I had gone from bored millionaire to desperate pauper—and I'm calling that a good thing. The choices were maddening, yes...but, see, that's the whole "good gameplay" part. *Immortal Throne* continues *Titan Quest*'s winning blend of killing, shopping, and strategic decision-making. It's a textbook case of a great expansion. • Jeff Green

VERDICT

Fixes most of original's flaws; new Act IV is huge; Dream Mastery skill rocks.

Boss battles are almost unfairly tough.

9/10

EXCELLENT

Games for Windows THE OFFICIAL ENGINE



• *Jade's* environments range from vibrant cities to the heavens themselves. And, yes—heaven's overrun with demons, too.

JADE EMPIRE: SPECIAL EDITION

Silver tongue, glass fist

PUBLISHER: 2K Games DEVELOPER: BioWare GENRE: Roleplaying AVAILABILITY: Retail ESRB RATING: Mature
 MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.8GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 8GB hard drive space (gamepad recommended) MULTIPLAYER: None VERSION REVIEWED: Near-Final Reviewable

REVIEW

Two years after striking gold with 2003's turn-based RPG *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, developer BioWare struck jade. Picture *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* unfolding in a colorful pseudo-fantasy world where airships zoom through the sky, shadow governments direct the course of history, and kung fu masters tangle with spooky ghosts, and that's *Jade Empire* (finally available on the PC... with some fancy "Special Edition" nomenclature to one-up its Xbox counterpart) in a nutshell.

Jade's story plays the "epic" card pretty quickly. After creating your character (a process as simple as choosing a name, a character skin, and a couple of martial arts styles, and then spreading some points across a trio of abilities), you soon learn from the wise old master of your little out-of-the-way martial arts academy that you're a star pupil with a destiny. It seems that the titular *Jade Empire's* overrun with ghosts, bandits, and a mysterious cabal of conspiratorial assassins...and you're—surprise!—destined to deal with all the trouble and figure out just who's running things back at the Imperial capital. The story's considerably less boilerplate than it sounds from this description...but let's not spoil it here.

IMPERIAL ENTANGLEMENTS

As in *KOTOR*, most of your problems get solved through either conversation or combat. The former is where *Jade's* attention to detail comes in—as you wander from place to place and clear objectives from your quest log, you meet



• Character development's quite basic—expect to get pretty powerful without much effort.

dozens of people, most of whom have a lot to say to you. It doesn't take long to get a sense of the time and attention put into the game's atmosphere and dialogue; once you get over the amusing irony of *Jade's* heavy reliance on Western accents, it's easy to appreciate the detail that went into the various plot threads. Most of your dialogue responses amount to "good" and "evil" choices but, unlike in *KOTOR*, these are framed more as differing-but-equally-valid philosophies (Way of the Open Palm/Way of the Closed Fist) and less as hard-and-fast moral beliefs, though they do dictate your martial options to some extent.

Jade's twitch-based combat isn't nearly as compelling as its fiction; brawls essentially boil down to button mashing, as you assail opponents with alternating weak/strong attacks. You can swap fighting styles on the fly, though you'll likely find yourself dumping all of your experience points into two or three stances and



• Your attitude toward NPCs determines which philosophy you follow, which dictates what fighting styles you can learn later on.

just running exclusively with those. For a game whose story hinges so much on the martial arts, *Jade's* strangely devoid of tactical depth or challenge; bumping the difficulty slider just swings things to the other extreme, and the on-demand Focus mode (read: bullet time) acts as an all-powerful panic button that trumps almost any foe you'll ever face. Oh, and the various traveling companions you hook up with (who run the gamut from a drifter to a demon-child) make combat even *less* challenging.

Compelling narrative and crippled combat make *Jade Empire* a case of form over function—and depending on what you want from a single-player RPG, that might be totally OK. It's short (in the 20-hour neighborhood for first-timers) and sweet; just don't let the premise trick you into expecting gameplay that isn't altogether there. • Ryan Scott

FOR A GAME WHOSE STORY HINGES SO MUCH ON THE MARTIAL ARTS, JADE'S STRANGELY DEVOID OF TACTICAL DEPTH OR CHALLENGE.

VERDICT

- Great characters; intriguing plot; beautiful and original Eastern fantasy setting.
- Combat and character development are shallower than you might expect.

7/10

GOOD





MAELSTROM

Blend ambition

PUBLISHER: Codemasters DEVELOPER: KDV Games GENRE: Real-Time Strategy AVAILABILITY: Retail ESRB RATING: Teen
 MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 2.4GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 4.5GB hard drive space MULTIPLAYER: 2-6 players VERSION REVIEWED: Near-Final Reviewable

REVIEW

Most pies contain only one kind of fruit for a reason. While it's possible to bake a delicious multifruit pie, each additional ingredient increases the likelihood that the tastes won't blend properly. And, as the time-honored gaming adage goes: "If it's true of baked goods, it's true of real-time strategy." For every brilliant single-ingredient *Company of Heroes*, we get a *Maelstrom*: ambitious, but ultimately flawed because it tries to do too much.

GOOD ARTISTS COPY

Right from the jump, *Maelstrom* hits you with its kitchen-sink approach, with the Earth decimated by no less than an environmental crisis, a meteor impact, a nuclear holocaust, and—oh, the humanity!—corporate globalization. Despite this ass-whooping ex-machina, two surviving factions cling to life: the *Mad Max*-esque Remnants and the conspicuously pristine Ascension. No sooner do these two nemeses reach a stalemate than a mysterious alien race called the Hai-Genti invades, throw-



• The direct-control mode allows you to take the reins of a single character, but its first-person control scheme is impractical.

ing the world into chaos. Why, it's almost as if *Maelstrom* ripped a page from...every sci-fi RTS ever made!

But the rip-off-itude doesn't stop with mere plot; gameplay, too, takes the smorgasbord approach. *Maelstrom* features three building-block resources, each gathered in one of the classic RTS ways. You either build resource-generating structures à la *Command & Conquer*, harvest resources from stockpiles à la *Age of Empires*, capture resource points à la *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War*, or some combination of the three. It's an approach that fails thanks to its overcomplexity.

Each race employs a fairly unique play style, and all of them (especially the Ascension) enjoy hugely overpowered early-tier units. A rush of a dozen foot soldiers can take down an entire enemy base; as a result, *Maelstrom*'s few original, nifty ideas—like the Ascension's transforming units or the ability to shape the land and control the weather—don't even come into play in most matches. And it doesn't help that the A.I. makes about as challenging an adversary as a pickled herring, rarely making use of the game's nifty features.



• Despite the passage of more than 25 minutes of play time, the A.I. player has one base structure and no units. What a challenge!

WHY, IT'S ALMOST AS IF MAELSTROM RIPPED A PAGE FROM... EVERY SCI-FI RTS EVER MADE.

GREAT ARTISTS STEAL

Like *WarCraft III*, *Maelstrom* utilizes "hero" characters (three per faction), all of which have special abilities, lots of hit points, and voice actors hired straight from an ESL class. And as in *Faces of War*, you can manually control these heroes (or any unit) through *Maelstrom*'s FPS-inspired "direct-control" system. While direct control has moments of usefulness in the single-player campaign, the interface is clumsy, and switching midgame from bird's-eye view to first-person is more jarring than a jelly factory. I never even used it in multiplayer or skirmish.

And that encapsulates the main problem with *Maelstrom*'s design: Tons of options don't equal tons of *useful* options. You can rip off every successful RTS convention in the known universe (and developer KDV Games obviously tried), but the final product won't necessarily add up to the sum of those parts. That's not to say *Maelstrom* is a bad game...just one with a pie-full of flaws. •Eric Neigher

VERDICT

Unique environmental controls; each faction is distinct in tone and play style.

Brain-donor A.I.; cookie-cutter sci-fi storyline; horrific voice acting.

6/10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows



• While every campaign mission feels like D-Day (build-build-build... attack!), it's hard not to marvel at the raw power on display here.



• It's possible to play on two separate monitors, splitting the screens between strategic and tactical views—but you'll need a time machine to build a PC powerful enough to handle both views on high detail.



• High terrain plays more of a mazelike role than anything, forcing you to craft carefully coordinated rearguard attacks or advance in successive waves in order to move through narrow canyons.

SUPREME COMMANDER

Supremely annihilating in total command

PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: Gas Powered Games GENRE: Real-Time Strategy AVAILABILITY: Retail ESRB RATING: Everyone 10+
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.8GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 8GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: 2-8 players VERSION REVIEWED: Gold Master

REVIEW

Jamming with Chris Taylor's Godzilla-sized *Supreme Commander* is like dunking your eyeballs into a giant tub of neon gnats—a glowing terrarium where whirring battalions of robot critters wade, lemminglike, into battle...or circle like hornets, transforming your screen into something like *Star Wars: Episode One* meets *Tron*. Think "ostentatious" on a scale that mocks anything you've played before (without mods, anyway), reined in by a sleek, muscular interface...and you end up with a respectable



• **Supreme Commander's A.I. is brutally calculating, dispatching aerial units to wear down shields and overwhelm AA guns in suicide bursts before trotting out ground troops at precisely coordinated intervals.**



• **You need to chain orders continuously—especially when coordinating hundreds of land, sea, and air units in frontal or flank assaults.**

enough RTS that almost outpaces its own towering hype.

TOTAL ADORATION

Almost, but not entirely: For all its pomp and circumstance, *SupCom's* pretty conventional, and it's easy to see why. Like in Taylor's *Total Annihilation*, you have to secure and defend lodes of "mass" and lay rows of power generators to produce "energy," then balance the precarious consumption rate of either to build land, air, and sea forces before winging the whole kit and caboodle at your opponents. Grind. Build. Attack. In light of all the fawning previews, it almost makes *SupCom* feel like another drive-by victim of PR tall talk.

Except that it's not, thanks to a few saving graces. Chalk the first up to Taylor's penchant for supersizing everything he touches. In *SupCom*, this takes the form of "strategic zoom," which involves blasting the camera into orbit with your mouse wheel and observing as your trundling units become tiny 2D symbols. Instead of bounding between scuffles from just a few stories up, you hover like a satellite, eyeballing hundreds of units spread across gargantuan maps.

Trouble is, those symbols look more like 8-bit scribbles scrambling around the screen in jumbled swarms—tough to follow, tougher still to select with any accuracy. In fact, it almost begs the question as to why the strategic view couldn't automatically translate clumps of units into aggregate markers (like NATO symbols) so that the perspective frankly felt more *strategic* and less like trying to herd ants through a telescope. It's unsettling enough that you'll probably end up using strategic zoom as more of a glorified "jump-map" for getting around quickly than anything else. Great idea here, Mr. Taylor...but it still has some kinks to work out.

There's no kinks in order queuing, thankfully. In the space of seconds, this *Total Annihilation* carryover lets you deploy a unit—say, an engineer (your builder class), who can clear battle flak, capture a few nearby enemy extractors, repair some tanks, then finish by building a dozen power plants. Add orders as you go, tack on extra helpers, or even harmonize complex offensive maneuvers. Extrapolate that out to massive multisquadron offensives...and after successfully coordinating a batch of forward bombers, flanking cruisers, follow-behind tanks, and mobile artillery, you won't want to play without this feature again.

INSTEAD OF BOUNDING BETWEEN SCUFFLES FROM JUST A FEW STORIES UP, YOU HOVER LIKE A SATELLITE, EYEBALLING HUNDREDS OF UNITS SPREAD ACROSS GARGANTUAN MAPS.

COGNATE COMMANDER

SupCom's three standalone campaigns acquaint you with the United Earth Federation (human), Cybrans (cybernetic humans), and Aeon (alien-influenced hippies...OK, and human), each engaged in a thousand years of future total war. Sadly, they're more excuses to stamp different colors on a bunch of look-alike, perform-alike tanks, planes, boats, and defensive guns; if you want to see the cool stuff, you must first level up land, sea, and air factories to build distinctive "experimental" megaweapons like the UEF's submersible aircraft carrier or the Aeon's unit-crushing Sacred Assault Bot.

Consequently, all three sides play an identical early game, beginning with the upgradeable Armored Command Unit (ACU), which starts as a wimpy base-builder but can grow powerful enough to house tactical nukes. Think of the ACU as each side's chess king—not the most powerful unit, but one of the more versatile, and the de facto benchmark for winning (lose your ACU and it goes nuclear—see ya later, alligator).

If you think *Total Annihilation's* still the cat's pajamas, look no further than *Supreme Commander*. It's the *ID4* of videogames—a little sleepy early on, occasionally a little baffling, but incontrovertibly epic...and you're here as much for the light show anyway, right?

• **Matt Peckham**

VERDICT

Seamless command vantage; unlimited order queues; beautiful FX-laden engine.

Lackluster diversity; muddled strategic view; snooze-worthy early game.

7/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

• Harpoon, this ain't.

BATTLESTATIONS: MIDWAY

Let's hope *Battlestations: All the Way* is better

PUBLISHER: Eidos Interactive DEVELOPER: Eidos Hungary GENRE: Action-Simulation AVAILABILITY: Retail ESRB RATING: Teen
 MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 6GB hard drive space (gamepad recommended) MULTIPLAYER: 2-8 players VERSION REVIEWED: Near-Final Reviewable

REVIEW

Ever play a pickup football game with your buddies? You all draw up some amazing, intricate play in the huddle—something involving a buttonhook, slanting flankers, three pump fakes, two pulling guards, and a play-action pass—then you yell “hike!” and everyone just runs around randomly, trying to get open. Take that situation, throw in some battleships, and you’ve got the 411 on *Battlestations: Midway*.

THE GATHERING STORM

It started with an ambitious plan: encapsulate the Pacific Theater of World War II in one deep but easy-to-pick-up experience. *Midway* attempts this by giving players the power to jump seamlessly from a tactical planning map to the controls of the ship, sub, or fighter of their choice. It’s a nifty idea; unfortunately, it starts to stumble as soon as you grab the controls. For instance: Flying a fighter proves frustratingly difficult with a keyboard and mouse, but it’s equally difficult to aim a ship’s guns with a gamepad. Switch back and forth a couple times, and you’ll end up more confused than Dale Earnhardt, Jr. at a right turn.

Retreating to the tactical map offers scant relief. While *Midway* purports to employ maneuvers like destroyer screening and combat-air patrol, it’s far too action-oriented to make those procedures worthwhile in practice. Moreover, the single-player missions typically put you up against such overwhelming odds that high-level tactics go out the window, anyway.

TRIUMPH AND TRAGEDY

Still, the core of *Midway* is its multiplayer component, and Internet games are stable and easy to set up. Gameplay mimics the single-player mode, except that individual members of a team only control a portion of its military assets. That

tends to emphasize real, honest-to-goodness teamwork, which is greatly to *Midway*’s credit.

On the other hand, multiplayer games also reveal the game’s biggest design foible: Get a few games under your ammo belt, and you’ll realize that the A.I. wildly outpaces human players at targeting ships’ guns, making torpedo runs, and avoiding depth charges. Once you come to this conclusion, you’ll go from actual playing to merely opening the tactical map, ordering your ships and planes to the attack, and wandering off to make yourself a sandwich. With a little luck, the A.I. will have taken out your opponent by the time you’re licking the mayo off your fingers—unless, of course, he’s employing the same clever *démarche*.

Midway simply dies from trying to do too much. Thanks to the lack of focus on one type of gameplay, the stuff you can do gets tired quicker than a narcoleptic on Thorazine. The submarine, for example, can perform exactly three tasks: move around, dive, and shoot torpedoes. That’s it. No deck guns, no emergency blow, no silent running—zilch. Ships and fighters are even less complex. This exaggerated simplicity just means you’ll never find a single deeply satisfying game experience here...just a bunch of vaguely dissatisfying ones. •Eric Neigher

MIDWAY SIMPLY DIES FROM TRYING TO DO TOO MUCH.



• You'll play most effectively when you handle the Xs and Os and let the computer take over for the Bobbies and Joes.



• Frustrating unrealism: Here, I fire explosive 5-inch shells into torpedoes mere feet below the surface...to no effect.

VERDICT

- ✦ Jack of all trades.
- ✦ Master of none.

5/10

AVERAGE





WAR FRONT: TURNING POINT

War Front has encountered a problem and needs to close

PUBLISHER: CDV Software/10tacle Studios DEVELOPER: Digital Reality GENRE: Real-Time Strategy AVAILABILITY: Retail Box ESRB RATING: Teen
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: 2-10 players VERSION REVIEWED: Near-Final Reviewable

REVIEW

Some developers make it hard to enjoy their games by peddling crappy controls, bad voice acting, a stupid plot, or just plain boring gameplay. *War Front: Turning Point* suffers from none of those problems. The campaign in this bizarre history RTS lets you play as the Allies and the Germans in over 20 action-packed scenarios showcasing World War II-era weaponry and some nifty "future weapons" that make a lot of noise...and look awfully cool when making things go "boom." You even get a wacky story and some memorable characters!

Then you're left staring at the Windows desktop when the mission ends, wondering what the heck just broke.

I finished the first German mission at least 16 times while trying to figure out why I couldn't go on. Ol' Roland Hellmann, the babe-loving German officer, whacked Tommies with fervor each and every time—oblivious to his story constantly getting cut short. If my Internet connection hadn't gone south while playing, I probably never would have figured out the problem, either. It turns out that *War Front* wants to do...something...online

between missions, and because it can't do whatever that is, the game just crashes. I disabled my network card (effectively sending my PC back to the period the game takes place in), and suddenly the campaign blitzkrieged on without a hitch. Germans, Americans, British, and Russians (well, maybe not the Russians) thanked me, because now I could finally save the world.

RED ALERT

The best parts of the game compare favorably with *Command & Conquer*. You crank out units en masse, throw 'em at the other guy, and replace the dead as quickly as they disintegrate, thanks to infinite production queues. Scenario triggers dot the battlefield, offering you secondary and bonus objectives while changing the main mission goal multiple times during a battle. Cinematic scenes are cheesy and exciting, and perfectly convey the game's belligerent Hollywood action-movie appeal. The musical score further perpetuates this, backing up the cacophony of battle carnage while all the characters engage in inspired summer-blockbuster-movie banter.

On the downside, it's easy to miss your orders and objectives during all the chaos, so pausing to review goals and issue commands—something

THEN YOU'RE LEFT STARING AT THE WINDOWS DESKTOP WHEN THE MISSION ENDS, WONDERING WHAT THE HECK JUST BROKE.

that's easy to do—is a necessity at first. Units get built, destroyed, and replaced so fast that it's all you can do to keep a varied force out there. If you back up troops with your heroes—who all gain special abilities—and try to keep a few units alive to gain experience, eventually you can grind your way to any victory.

That same build-and-grind method works just as well in skirmish games (and we wish we could have tested multiplayer, but the aforementioned crash bugs plague this mode, too). The skirmish A.I. doesn't put up a fight for long, and units don't react well unless you're in control, but you can at least use this mode to get a handle on what endgame units are capable of. These skirmish maps have some nice designs, too—in visual and gameplay terms—so, hopefully, multiplayer gets fixed in a patch...along with the debilitating crash bugs, all of which unfortunately blow a major cloud of disappointment over *War Front's* action-strategy appeal. **David J. Long**



• "Gotta be an Irish pub on the next corner. Onward, men!"

VERDICT

Lots of action with explosions galore; solid, film-style production.

Bugs cause crashes unless you disable your Internet connection altogether.

5/10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows
THE OFFICIAL ENGINE

SAM & MAX: EPISODE 3—THE MOLE, THE MOB, AND THE MEATBALL

So this dog and this rabbit walk into a Mafia hideout...

PUBLISHER: Telltale Games/GameTap DEVELOPER: Telltale Games GENRE: Adventure AVAILABILITY: E-tail (www.gametap.com or <http://snm.telltalegames.com>) ESRB RATING: Not Rated MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 800MHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 215MB hard drive space MULTIPLAYER: None VERSION REVIEWED: Near-Final Downloadable

REVIEW

Y Episode No. 3 in Telltale Games' continuing *Sam & Max* point-and-click adventure series sends our favorite dog-and-rabbit detective duo undercover to infiltrate the "Toy Mafia," a crime organization made



up of 1930s-era mobsters who wear creepy, giant teddy-bear heads and yield to the whims of their Marlon Brando-esque Don.

Of course, this typically oddball plot paves the way for corny dialogue, but unlike in previous episodes, it's effortlessly funny—even sharper and punchier, and just a bit more grown-up. The only recurring joke ("Does

the carpet match the drapes?") is actually kind of lame, but the rest of the game is hysterical; every puzzle provides a good punchline, with the solutions never seeming illogical or tacked-on. Because the design goes out of its way to avoid the contrived puzzles that make most adventure games drag, the solutions themselves often feel a bit too easy. Like

we've said of previous episodes, it's "adventure-gaming lite."

And, once again, the characters and locations feel rather limited. Series regulars Sybil and Bosco return (coincidentally tied up in the Mafia's dealings), and your time gets divided between Sam and Max's usual street block and the Toy Mafia's equally small headquarters and casino. Exploration and variety take a backseat to the constant stream of jokes (an unavoidable trade-off, given the series' episodic nature). Everything else is unmitigated and unapologetic fluff—the joy is in Sam and Max's wit, after all—and seasoned adventure gamers might find the game too simple to really sink their teeth into. •Jenn Frank

VERDICT

➤ **Clever puzzles; a snappy script; a joy to play.**

❌ **Too little to explore; too easy; over too soon.**

7/10

GOOD

Games for Windows THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

THE SIMS 2: SEASONS

A change in the weather

PUBLISHER: EA Games DEVELOPER: Maxis GENRE: Simulation AVAILABILITY: Retail, E-tail (<http://thesims2.ea.com>) ESRB RATING: Teen MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.3GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 1.5GB hard drive space, *The Sims 2* MULTIPLAYER: None VERSION REVIEWED: Near-Final Reviewable

REVIEW

Y Forget *World of Warcraft*—once you fall prey to *Sims 2* addiction, you're not likely to get much else done. Did you want to take a shower today? Take the dog for a walk? Spend some time with your significant other? Too bad! You'll have your hands full doing the virtual equivalent of these things with your needy Sims, who—thanks to the new *Seasons* expansion—can now run outside to catch anything from fireflies to a cold.

Seasons goes beyond the standard cloud-watching and stargazing activities of previous *Sims 2* expansions, making weather an integral part of the game. The fun comes from watching how differently each season unfolds and how it affects your Sims: Winter helps with family bonding, spring brings romance, summer builds friendships, and fall quickens learning new skills. Sims can play in the leaves, dance in the rain, have snowball fights, or even get struck by lightning—virtual weather's never been quite this engrossing (or unpredictable). Gardening's all the rage now, too... and though it's initially tedious, a new condition



• **It's like a little snow globe. Must resist...urge to shake monitor.**

called "PlantSimism" bestows your Sims with some amazing agricultural talents.

According to posts on fan sites (dating back as far as 2003), plenty of *Sims* junkies have awaited meaningful weather effects since the original *Sims 2*. Yes, those fans are patient people (the amount of time it takes *Seasons* to load up is a testament to that)—and now, they finally get their day in the sun. •Tara Nelson



• **"Yippee! It's time to play in the leaves! Then it's time for my medication!"**

VERDICT

➤ **Reactions to varying climate make *The Sims 2* more lifelike.**

❌ **Loads slowly.**

8/10

GOOD

Games for Windows THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE



THE HOT LIST

Five still-available games to buy right now



STRATEGY!

With *Supreme Commander*—and, soon, *Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars*—we're eager to flex our real-time strategy skills anew...and these five rockin' strategy bundles make for an excellent refresher course.

STAR WARS: EMPIRE AT WAR

A good *Star Wars* RTS? What's this, now? After a string of outright strategy suckfests (namely *Rebellion*, *Force Commander*, and *Galactic Battlegrounds*), it seems the Force is finally with LucasArts in *Empire at War*. Sure, its land-based battles hew close to traditional RTS conventions, but outer space skirmishes with Star Destroyers and Death Stars bring a slew of fresh tactical considerations. Now if only someone could figure out how to make a good *Star Wars* MMORPG....



WARCRAFT III BATTLE CHEST

Blizzard's games have more staying power than almost any non-MMO PC game in existence. Five-plus years after their various launches, *StarCraft*, *Diablo II*, and *WarCraft III* still host very healthy numbers of online games. In light of the *World of Warcraft* expansion's release, we couldn't help but revisit the classic *WarCraft III*, which is still as much fun as ever, thanks to its clever mix of strategy and RPG elements. If you haven't jumped on this bandwagon yet, the original WC3 and its expansion, *The Frozen Throne*, are still readily available as part of Blizzard's Battle Chest collection series.



WARHAMMER 40,000: DAWN OF WAR—GOLD EDITION

Company of Heroes fanatics, know your roots: Relic Entertainment's other awesome RTS game, set in Games Workshop's future-fantasy *Warhammer 40,000* universe, keeps the gameplay squarely focused on action, thanks to an excellent capture-and-control approach to resource-harvesting. The *Gold Edition* comes with both the original *Dawn of War* and the first expansion, *Winter Assault*—giving you a total of five diverse armies to choose from (all taken from the *Warhammer 40,000* tabletop miniatures game). Oh, and don't forget the equally great second expansion, *Dark Crusade*, too.



RISE OF NATIONS: GOLD EDITION

Former Sid Meier collaborator and Big Huge Games founder Brian Reynolds did the unthinkable with his first real-time strategy game: He out-Ensembled *Age of Empires* developer Ensemble Studios. *Rise of Nations* (and its expansion, *Thrones & Patriots*) succeeds with its winning blend of real-time and turn-based gameplay conventions; if you dig the sadly underappreciated *Rise of Legends*, give *Rise of Nations* a whirl, too—it's easily one of the decade's hallmark RTS titles.



COMMAND & CONQUER: THE FIRST DECADE

Since 1995, the *Command & Conquer* series has had a dozen entries, from the original C&C to the fan-favorite C&C: *Red Alert* and its sequel to the more recent *C&C Generals*. This collection squeezes 'em all onto one budget-priced DVD, along with plenty of developer interviews and other bells 'n' whistles. What better way to brush up in time for C&C3?

REVIEW INDEX

Game names in yellow indicate GFW Editors' Choice award winners

GAME TITLE	SCORE	ISSUE
1701 A.D.	8	3
Agatha Christie: Murder on the Orient Express	2	3
Age of Empires III: The WarChiefs	9	1
ArchLord	4	3
Battlefield 2142	6	2
Company of Heroes	10	1
D.I.R.T.: Origin of the Species	5	3
Dark Messiah of Might and Magic	4	2
DEFCON	9	1
Distant Guns	7	2
Europa Universalis III	9	4
EverQuest II: Echoes of Faydwer	8	3
Evidence: The Last Ritual	4	3
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Gothic 3	5	3
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Guild Wars Nightfall	9	2
Heroes of Annihilated Empires	5	3
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LOTR: The Battle for Middle-earth II: The Rise of the Witch-king	6	3
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Medieval II: Total War	8	2
Need for Speed Carbon	7	3
Neverwinter Nights 2	6	2
NHL Eastside Hockey Manager 2007	7	2
Phantasy Star Universe	8	3
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Sid Meier's Railroads!	7	2
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Space Empires V	5	3
Splinter Cell Double Agent	5	3
Star Trek: Legacy	5	4
Star Wars: Empire at War—Forces of Corruption	6	2
Stronghold Legends	3	2
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	6	2
Warhammer: Mark of Chaos	7	2



Extend

Where your games live on forever!



• In a way, you have to feel sorry for big, ugly Ogres like this guy. It's not his fault he's so big and ugly. Maybe we should hug him instead.

“I FELT BAD FOR BRUCE. HE'S JUST AN OLD UGLY ELF HUNTER DUDE WHO NO ONE CARES ABOUT.”



• My lady, I beseech you, no more spider killing.



• A party for the server's first Horde paladin!



BREAKQUEST

Falling Pieces

Our casual games columnist spent his month playing a brick-busting game. WTF?

88

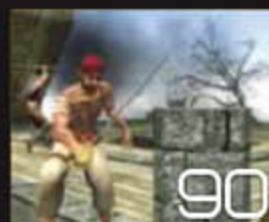


TAX DAY

Crisis on Infinite Servers

April means tax time... but should that include MMOs?

89



PVIII

Updates

This month, we look at *Half-Life 2* mod *Pirates, Vikings, & Knights II*.

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TOM vs. BRUCE

Two gamers enter. One gamer wins.

TOM AND BRUCE TAKE ON THE WORLD OF WARCRAFT

PUBLISHER: Blizzard Entertainment DEVELOPER: Blizzard Entertainment GENRE: MMORPG ESRB RATING: Teen

BURNIN' FOR YOU

+ We were poised to jump in as soon as *The Burning Crusade* was activated on January 15 at 9 p.m. California time and whatever time it was in Flyover Country where Bruce lives. We wanted to be there for the lag, the crashed servers, the disconnects, the busted authentication, and all that stuff that brings MMO gamers together during a launch. Unfortunately, Blizzard disappointed us. We enjoyed no such spectacle. Instead, we simply played *World of Warcraft*.

"WHO CAN TAKE THE SUNSHINE?"

TOM: The Blood Elf starting area was, well, colorful. It looked like a cross between Disneyland, the place where Augustus Gloop falls into the chocolate river in *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*, and Hibernia in *Dark Age of Camelot*. It's enough to make you wish you'd rolled a Draenei. Fortunately, about six or seven levels later, it gave way to the consistent gray of the Ghostlands for about 10 levels, which is enough to bring you back to palette neutral. So it all worked out by the time we hit level 20 and had to leave the Blood Elf lands for the familiar Barrens and Silverpine.

"I WANT TO SAY ONE WORD TO YOU. JUST ONE WORD. COPPER."

BRUCE: The *World of Warcraft* economy is eerily like a real economy, which is a fact someone has probably already used for a Ph.D. thesis in Time-Wasting. Just before Christmas, a friend of mine told me his enchanting-materials business boomed because people were buying them in order to enchant in-game Christmas presents. That's not a crazy role-playing typo. So weird demand cycles are totally part of the *WarCraft* business climate.

In *Burning Crusade*, the addition of the jewelcrafting profession created an artificial bubble in metals prices, since jewelcrafting requires metal bars such as copper, bronze, and so on. Because most of the people who want to try the new profession are established players, and because they don't want to spend time mining ore, and because they have a lot of gold, they just look up copper on the auction house and buy whatever they need. The last time I played the game, about

six months before the *Burning Crusade* launch, a stack of 20 copper bars was going for 20 silver. Now, the price is 2 gold. So the first profession I choose? Mining.

Furthermore, it seems like 90 percent of the people playing in the first week are off playing their level 60s. This leaves the Horde newbie area of Durotar—where you can collect 100 copper in less than an hour—almost uninhabited. That's 10 gold an hour. When I first played *World of Warcraft*, I barely had 40 gold to buy my horse by level 40. Now, I'm level 10—and I have 125 gold. After buying 10 gold worth of items. In a few years, I'll be making that much just off the interest.

BEAUTY AND THE GEEKS

TOM: Bruce got rich off jewelcrafting, but I'd just like to point out that I made 15 gold before I even got to level 2. Now you too can duplicate my amazing success with the "How To Make 15 Gold Before You're Even Level 2" plan!

First, wait for Blizzard to release a hotly anticipated expansion pack that adds a new race and lets the factions play classes they've never played before. Second, roll up a character of that race and class before anyone else on the server (note: Make sure it's a female character). Third, get invited to a crowded city. Fourth, type "/dance." Then just click "accept" in the trade windows!

It worked for me, and I didn't even mean to do it. As I was staring at the screen of races and classes, Bruce mentioned I should probably be a Paladin, since that was new for the Horde. I was a bit worried about having to be lawful good, but Bruce told me there's no alignment in *World of Warcraft*, where everyone is essentially chaotic evil. So I chose a Paladin. A hot chick Paladin, of course. Duh.

So as Bruce and I were running around an empty Candyland killing first-level mana worms at mere seconds after 9 p.m. on January 15, the bright pink tells started rolling in. "OMG HOW U GET BC SO ERLY?" and "What duz it look like? I hafta no!!!1" Stuff like that. Having been away from *WOW* for nearly two years, I was busy reading tutorial boxes and didn't even know these people were talking to me, much less how to reply to them.

But then a series of messages caught my eye. From my years as a *D&D* player, I know what >



• Finally! A game that lets us kill spiders!



• Excuse me, sir, have you seen any spiders nearby?



• Who needs a flying mount when you can cruise on one of these?



• Bloodchick and her fancy swordplay.



• Sire, forgive us, you have a giant question mark on your head.

it means when you affix a lowercase "g" to a number. And from the fact that I never got above level 20 in *WOW*, I know how important gs are. I never saw more than 10 at a time. So when someone promised me 1g—one whole g!—if I'd teleport to Orgrimmar so they could "awe at me," I took notice.

However, for all I knew, this was a common form of "griefing" or "ganking newbs," as they say. I was worried I'd be teleported somewhere and repeatedly grieved and ganked against my will. Plus, being a Paladin, Bruce tells me I'm supposed to be doing something for him called "tanking."

"Hey, Bruce, this guy is telling me I can make a lot of money if I let him teleport me to Orgrimmar. Should I do this?"

"Sure," Bruce said. It was the last he'd see of me for about a half hour.

After doing some complicated stuff involving joining a group—well in advance of the tutorial boxes that explained to me how that all worked—I found myself in Orgrimmar, surrounded by a storm of polygons that looked vaguely like people's characters standing inside each other. And everyone was shouting things in bright red.

"It's the very first Blood Elf Paladin! She's here in Orgrimmar!"

"Where? All I see is a bunch of fat Tauren ass."

They were looking at me—and occasionally throwing money at me. I typed in the only emote I knew: /dance. They really liked that, but I refused when they asked me to do it naked. I wanted to preserve what little dignity I had left as a grown man sitting at a computer pretending to be a Blood Elf Paladin.

I got lots of requests to tell a joke, so I start typing into the chat window the one about the three-legged pig. But then someone whispered to me

that I should just type "/silly" and let Blizzard do the actual joke-telling.

At one point, I had to use the skills I'd learned playing console games by making a tricky jump onto a mailbox, where everyone could see me more clearly. Eventually, after about 10 minutes and 15g, I needed to get back to "tank" for Bruce.

You remember that scene with the Playboy Bunnies in *Apocalypse Now*, when they're mobbed by the soldiers and have to be extracted by helicopter? This was like a cross between that and *Lord of the Rings*. And I was extracted by a hearthstone instead of a helicopter.

I split the money with Bruce, since I felt bad for him. He's just an ugly old Elf Hunter dude who no one cares about. Frankly, I think he looks a little, well, fruity. His armor always ends up looking more like Lycra biker shorts than armor. And his hair? Don't get me started. That whole, I dunno, Fabio/*Highlander* look is really passé.

On Bruce's behalf, I've been keeping my eye out for barbershops in the world of *World of Warcraft*, but so far I haven't found any. Maybe someone from *Second Life* can get in here and make a fortune with a player-made beauty parlor to fix bad Elven haircuts and treat dry Undead skin. Maybe they can even recommend a weight-loss plan for some of these Taurens. I'm lucky that I'm a hot Blood Elf chick who doesn't have to worry about that stuff.

RETURN TO SIN'DOREI, ADDRESS UNKNOWN

BRUCE: Back when I first started *World of Warcraft*, a friend of mine found out I was writing about the game and—I presume as a joke—bought me one of those licensed *WarCraft* novels. It was about as bad as you might expect, and

then a whole lot worse. I think I finished 30 pages. Since that's about 30 pages more than I've read of the in-game backstory, I'm not exactly an expert on how the two fit together. And, ultimately, it shouldn't matter. We all know what actually happened in the real world of *WarCraft*, so if either the game interpretation or the book interpretation gets some things a bit wrong, we can just chalk it up to artistic license.

Don't tell that to *WarCraft* historians, though. One of the new quests that Tom and I had to complete was a sort of side quest that showed us how to get from the Blood Elf land to the Undercity. It involved returning an amulet to one of the NPCs, who then was nice enough to summon some ghosts and sing a song. *Or did she?* Apparently, there's some disagreement about whether the NPC is singing or the ghosts. Seriously. Some people are getting really mad about it. There are all kinds of issues—what the song is about, why certain words are used, even the significance of the emotes in the quest.

If you want to get an idea of how complex the world of *WarCraft* really is, check out the WOWWiki at: www.wowwiki.com/Talk:Lament_of_the_Highborne. You'll get to read this awesome sentence: *If you consider Blizzard's descriptions of Night Elf society prior to the WotA, it's easy enough for "Sin'Dorei" to be in the lexicon as a social class.*

Right on, professor!

EPILOGUE: BLIZZARD WINS THE INTERNET

BRUCE: Over the course of two weeks, Tom and I defeated many foes and leveled many, uh, levels, eventually finishing all the quests in the new Blood Elf areas (Sunstrider Isle, Eversong Woods, and the Ghostlands) including some nasty ones in



• I will not grant audience with you, fool, unless you are at least this big.



• Brooski and Rumsfeld turn an Ogre un-undead.



• There is nothing hotter than two hot chicks fighting.



• Why fight when you can pick flowers instead?

Deatholme, scary land of death where Tom died about 400 times. Once we hit the lofty level of 21, I thought that would be it. I had already seen most of the world before, and I don't have the time or patience to get a character high enough to see the new übercontent. But then a funny thing happened. Tom and I got the word in Orgrimmar to report to Splintertree Post. Yeah, I knew where that was. Ashenvale Forest. But as soon as we hit the Barrens, I was all like, "Hey, I remember this place! This is awesome!" We took a detour to the Crossroads so we could grab the flight path there, and I immediately started looking at all the NPCs' names. There's Segra Darkthorn! I can do those Barrens quests! Bring on the quillboards!

I don't want to sound like some kind of Internet doofus, but whatever Blizzard did to make the world of *WarCraft* seem so comfortable and familiar is a big part of what's unique about MMOs. And in my experience, this is the only game that really has that feeling down cold. It goes without saying that I'll always be suspicious of the Elf, the Dwarf, and certainly the Gnome, but that won't stop me from logging back in time after time, just to keep an eye on them. I mean, someone has to.

TOM: It's funny how circumspect Bruce has to be to admit he's totally a fanboi for a given game. Me? I love *WOW* and I don't need to justify that I'll still be playing long after this article has been read and forgotten. Look us up next time you're on Frostwolf. I'm Bloodchick; he's Brooski. We'll be there. •

TOP TEN THINGS...

...Said by Tom Chick
While Playing *Burning Crusade*

10. Hey, look at me, I'm off-tanking. This is off-tanking, right?
9. Tranquillien is the economic capital of the Ghostlands, but Sanctum of the Sun is the political capital.
8. I keep forgetting—are we the good guys or the bad guys?
7. Remember, there's a "pal" in "Paladin."
6. It's not called "porting." It's called "hearthstoning."
5. [While running for the elevator to Undercity] Hold the door! Hold the door!
4. *Battlestar Galactica* is on, so I have to log off for about an hour.
3. \dance
2. Hold on—briarthorn.
1. I don't know if you've noticed lately, but I am totally hot.

...Said by Bruce Geryk
While Playing *Burning Crusade*

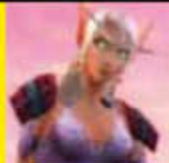
10. So I made about 130 gold yesterday.
9. Would you consider the Draenei space aliens or illegal aliens?
8. Why is that Troll smoking dope?
7. The events in this quest happened differently in the real world of *WarCraft*.
6. RUN! THERE ARE TWO LEVEL 70s GANKING EVERYBODY AT TAREN MI...
5. This quest-reward breastplate is nice, but it doesn't go with my boots.
4. Don't ever say "grats" when I ding, because all it means is I wasted more of my life in an MMO. You should probably say, "I'm really sorry to hear that."
3. Just because I gave you this jewelry doesn't mean we're dating.
2. Hold on—copper.
1. I have to feed Rumsfeld.

FINAL SCORE

A tie. Tom and Bruce both lose for having spent so much time playing an MMO.

Tom Chick

Tom Chick is Frostwolf's first Horde Paladin. He is totally hot. His pet is a Pseudodragon that doesn't fight cuz it's a collector's-edition goodie.



Bruce Geryk

Bruce Geryk is a Blood Elf Hunter who has a giant orange butterfly as a pet. He tried to man up by naming the butterfly Rumsfeld.





LINE OF ATTACK

Your monthly guide to hardcore war-gaming

COLUMN

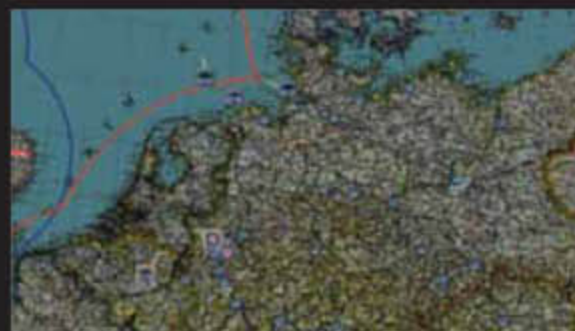
+ If you can overlook its unfortunate name, HPS Simulations' *Defending the Reich* has a lot to offer war gamers looking for a simple, clean game that doesn't take days to finish. Like last year's *Down in Flames* from Battlefront, *Defending the Reich* demonstrates how detail and length aren't requirements for a good game.

The subject is a neglected one in war-gaming: the controversial night bombing of Germany by the RAF Bomber Command. Each turn represents a week from August 1943 through May 1944, in which the British plot their targets and the Germans react with their night-fighter force. Playing in continuous time, the Germans must assess which raid is the main force, and vector in fighters to intercept it while not being distracted by decoy raids. At the beginning of each turn, the Germans can upgrade squadrons with new aircraft, increase squadrons' efficiency, and engage in a technology race to gain an advantage in things like radar and tactical doctrine.



• The playing area is a map of Germany that is bright by day...

The reason for the simple approach probably stems from the fact that this is really a computer version of a board game designed by HPS Simulations' Gregory Smith. Coder and programmer Jim Lunsford (*Decisive Action*) helped bring this to digital fruition, and the result is a game that, at its core, rewards good, simple decisions and moves at a steady clip, never bogging down in useless trivia. There is a good amount of tension in each raid, as the Germans wait for the Allied thrust to reveal itself. It plays much better as the Germans for this reason, which is probably why



• ...and dark by night. Computer graphics magic!

it got that awful name.

I've long been a big advocate of games that take a simpler approach and avoid the "simulate everything" tendency that bogs down more ambitious projects. *Defending the Reich* isn't perfect, but it's a nice change of direction. • Bruce Geryk

Bruce Geryk

Bruce knows more about wargames than all of us put together. Visit his blog at <http://grognards.1UP.com>.



FALLING PIECES

The best in casual games

COLUMN

+ Sometimes, the biggest challenge in casual gaming is finding games worth playing. And I don't just mean games worth playing past the 60-minute free trial...but games that merit the slim slice of hard drive space that the demo consumes and the three minutes it takes to download. A "match-three" game is no longer original, and Egyptian- or Atlantis-inspired artwork hasn't been original since the pyramids went up and Atlantis went down.

Happily, the two games I played this month don't skimp on originality at all. The first, *BreakQuest* (\$20 at www.nurium.com), might not sound too original: It's a brick-busting game. But *BreakQuest* puts a very different spin on the *Arkanoid* model. First off, its levels sport a unique minimalist look—the most ornate stage just might be a *Space Invaders* homage. Many levels consist of little more than simple shapes hanging from tethers—which brings us to the big gameplay twist: physics. Everything's in motion, meaning that said shapes move erratically around the screen,



• TangleBee at once challenges your reflexes and your masculinity.

changing things up every time they're struck. Gravity is a player-controlled force; you can pull the ball down (not just hit it up) to strike targets. Fun!

KILLER BEES!

But my big guilty pleasure this month is *TangleBee* (\$20 at www.smartmelon.com). Why a guilty pleasure? Because the airy-fairy music and the "pulled from an eighth-grade girl's poetry journal" prem-



• Even with such simplistic level design, tracking the ball on the constantly moving *BreakQuest* playfield is tough.

ise of untangling adorable honeybees in a world of wonder and beauty and nature is profoundly embarrassing. *TangleBee* is essentially a series of geometry puzzles, tasking you with clearing a honeycomb clotted with cute bees that are ensnared in spiderwebs. No, really—that's it. It's as weird and hard to imagine as it sounds, but once you start playing the game, it's as remarkably simple to learn as it is difficult to master. • Robert Coffey

HAPPILY, THE TWO GAMES I PLAYED THIS MONTH DON'T SKIMP ON ORIGINALITY AT ALL.

Robert Coffey

Robert loves each and every one of his adorable little honeybees.





CRISIS ON INFINITE SERVERS

Trekking across the vast MMORPG landscape
This month: Tax day!

COLUMN

+ It's the same scene every year: panic, rioting in the streets of the Undercity, women pulling their baby Murlocs in off the sidewalks. Some rabble-rouser rides across the Internet like Paul Revere, shouting, "The taxmen are coming!" and we commence flipping our lids.

All right, so it's really more of a collective slight nervousness than a full-on paranoid bedlam, but taxation's an easy topic to get touchy about whenever April rolls around. We can only stomach so many news stories describing MMO X as having a gross domestic product greater than Third-World-country Y before we start wondering when the powers that be will smell the money. Julian Dibbell speculated about its inevitability in his book, *Play Money*, last year...and a few months ago, Dan Miller—senior economist with the U.S. Congress' Joint Economic Committee—declared that, "The question is when, not if, Congress and the IRS start paying attention to these issues." Holy hell—am I headed to jail if I forget to mention my level 70 Night Elf Hunter on my 1040?

DO NOT PASS GO

Taxing the more traditional dollars obtained when someone actually sells videogame loot isn't much of a worry for most of us. That scenario really only messes with gold farmers and career traders, and as far as the average MMO player is concerned, hey—screw those guys. The real fear in our hearts: One day, the gov'mint will start caring about nonliquid assets like elves, gold coins, and spaceships...whether we're interested in actually selling them or not. To trot out the already old cliché, it's like the taxman wanting a piece of your *Monopoly* hotels because someone else is passing his around under the table in exchange for \$20 bills. The notion's absurd everywhere...except within the weird world of tax law.

Taxable income includes everything from tangibles like cookies to more ephemeral and subjective things like works of art, concert tickets, or advice. Those big, scary books that most sane people pay accountants to understand for them don't really narrow down what counts as taxable income so much as meticulously define it as damn near any piece of matter, energy, or information that



• Sometimes, there's an upside to videogames being incomprehensible and scary to legislators like former Joint Economic Committee chairman Jim Saxton.

Virtue Server : CoH Influence			
Influence	Items	Accounts	PowerLeveling
Influence 5,000K \$12.09			Add to Cart
Influence 6,000K \$17.71			Add to Cart
Influence 20,000K \$41.19			Add to Cart
Influence 40,000K \$76.59			Add to Cart
Influence 60,000K \$110.69			Add to Cart
Influence 90,000K \$162.09			Add to Cart

• If IGE's exchange rate has anything to do with reality, then I made more in an hour of punching supervillains than I did writing all year. Thankfully, it doesn't.



• As if all this nonsense weren't complicated enough, do duped items count as income, too?

should happen to pass into your possession over the course of the year. That goofy *World of Warcraft* gnome that editor-in-chief Jeff Green's been leveling isn't any more intangible than, say, stocks.

DO NOT COLLECT \$200

Actual ownership presents a small issue, of course. Most any MMO has—nested within that lengthy Terms of Service agreement that nobody actually reads—a little note informing you that all the crap looted off of giant rats or whatever you've been pretending to stab to death is the publisher's property, and they reserve the right to kick your ass if you go around eBaying it. Again, tax law's got it covered. Did you knock over a liquor store this year? Maybe embezzle a little from your employer? You can probably guess how

many people actually bother declaring their mugging-related income, but it's thoughtfully included on the big list of crazy stuff you have to pay income tax on.

Thankfully, it's not our job to figure this crap out. It's the problem of that Joint Economic Committee we mentioned earlier, and former committee chairman Jim Saxton seems pretty set in his belief that "virtual economies represent an area where technology has outpaced the law" and that mucking around with them "would be a mistake." For the foreseeable future, it looks like we're safe from taxes on our Hobbits...not because it's weird or unethical or anything, but because it would be a monumental pain in the government's collective ass. Which is great—because if it weren't, I'd probably get bumped a couple of brackets. • Scott Sharkey

HOLY HELL—AM I HEADED TO JAIL IF I FORGET TO MENTION MY LEVEL 70 NIGHT ELF HUNTER ON MY 1040?

Scott Sharkey

Scott hates the nickname "Scott Snarky" almost as much as he hates the nickname "Get Your Assignments in on Time, Dammit!"



UPDATES

Our two cents on the latest mods and patches



• Stated goal: Hold the hill. Typical outcome: utter chaos.

PIRATES, VIKINGS, & KNIGHTS II

The Society for Creative Annoyances

DEVELOPER: PVKII Team GENRE: Multiplayer Deathmatch AVAILABILITY: Free Download (www.pvkii.com)
 ESRB RATING: Not Rated MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.2GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 600MB hard drive space, Half-Life 2
 MULTIPLAYER: 2-64 players VERSION REVIEWED: Beta 1.0

MOD REVIEW

+ *Half-Life 2* mods are, by and large, humorless treks through earth-toned, postapocalyptic wastelands, their creators seemingly desperate to race to the bottom of the dystopian barrel. Conspicuously absent from the ranks of *HL2*'s player-released content: the lighthearted mods typical of *Half-Life 1* that kept many of us occupied between rounds of *Counter-Strike* and *Natural Selection*. *Pirates, Vikings, & Knights II* mercifully bucks the trend, ushering players into a world as colorful and bright as it is hectic and funny—no surprise, then, that it's the sequel to a *HL1* mod.

Attitude isn't the only thing *PVK2* shares with its predecessor. The maps, modes, and player classes in *PVK2* Beta 1.0 mimic the *HL1* original, as does its unapologetically standard concept: The three titular clans vie for control of loot and territory, slinging blades, bombs, bullets, and stereotypical verbal barbs at one another. Standard is fine when it works...and, for the most part, it does here; unfortunately, some parts of *PVK2* weather the transition to the Source engine less gracefully than others.

BEGGING FOR BOUNDARIES

PVK2's armor snags on its biggest selling point: Melee combat has all the visceral intensity of a pillow fight. It's not a problem of hit detection (though that *is* an issue), but hit reflection. Whiffs animate the same as whacks, meaning the only indication of damage dealt comes in the form of a grunt from your victim, and occasionally a perplexing backward-hop animation that better illustrates a physics hiccup than a blade to the gut. The questionable hit recognition incentivizes flailing-for-effect...and why not? Precision strikes are seldom recommended and never required.

Blocking adds further insult to the combat system's injury. A weapon positioned to parry becomes a veritable force field, protecting the wielder against most any melee attack within his line of sight. Weapon heft has no bearing on the ability to block: A Pirate's cutlass turns aside a Viking's heavy ax as easily as it does a Knight's short sword, leaving the attacker momentarily stunned and frustratingly vulnerable. And with no downside in sight, the blocking dynamic's both overused and overpowered, serving only to stunt the action. Rather than encouraging skill-reliant hack-n-slash, duels hinge on players' ability to tolerate staring contests from behind their blades.



• This may look like a powerful swing, but if *PVK2*'s blocking system is to be believed, a small child lurks in that armor.



• Vikings valiantly face down a doomed Knight.



• Pirates make a push for the Knights' booty.

BURIED TREASURE

In its current state, *Pirates, Knights, & Vikings II* is a mod you'll load with a grin and exit with a grimace, with unpredictable combat topping the list of disappointing reasons to uninstall. This issue proves especially upsetting due to *PVK2*'s otherwise solid—though not exactly groundbreaking—foundation and talented development team. Bear in mind that *PVK2* is in its infancy as a mod (public beta 1.0 as of this writing); it's hopefully only a few vocal downloaders away from having its most egregious kinks hammered out. •Rory Manion

VERDICT

+ Fun maps; goofy premise; tons of potential.

- Floaty combat; decidedly average play modes.

5/10

AVERAGE



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ON FILEFRONT

The latest and greatest demos and patches

+ *Games for Windows: The Official Magazine* and *FileFront.com* have joined forces to bring you both the best possible PC-gaming coverage and access to the hottest game downloads—demos, mods, patches, and more. Head to GFW.FileFront.com to try these out for yourself.

BATTLESTATIONS: MIDWAY (DEMO)

Planes, ships, and submarines collide in this large-scale, third-person action game from Eidos. This multiplayer demo features one map that is playable online or via LAN.

EUROPA UNIVERSALIS III (DEMO)

War, trade, and explore in this single-player demo of Paradox's strategy game. Try some tutorial chapters, featuring Western nations from 1492 to 1520.

THE SHIVAH (DEMO)

In this oddball graphic adventure, you play a rabbi struggling to keep his synagogue afloat. When a member of your congregation dies and leaves you his cash, can you accept it in good faith?

WAR FRONT (DEMO)

Try out the single-player demo of 10Tacle's alternate-reality World War II RTS. It speculates about what might have happened if Hitler were assassinated early on in the war.

BOOKWORM ADVENTURES (DEMO)

Part word game, part epic adventure, *BWA* is the sequel to one of the greatest casual games ever made. The adventure aspects offer an addictive twist on the norm.

SAM & MAX: EPISODE 2—SITUATION: COMEDY (DEMO)

We've got an idea...and it doesn't involve high explosives! Try out the second installment of the episodic graphic adventure game.

THE BLACKWELL LEGACY (DEMO)

Medium Rosangela Blackwell and her helpful spirit cohort Joey Mallone investigate a series of suicides at a university in this first episode in a series of graphic adventures.

DODGE THAT ANVIL! (SHAREWARE)

The rabbits of Eastwarren have been forced underground by a freak anvil storm—it's your duty to brave the surface and nab food for your starving lagomorph friends.

LEGO STAR WARS II V1.2 (PATCH)

If you're having problems with gamepads or ATI-based videocards, this patch might fix some of your woes.

CINEMA EMPIRE (DEMO)

Manage a movie theater and cultivate it into the nation's largest cinema chain. The demo includes the complete tutorial and the campaign's first mission.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT V2.0.6 (PATCH)

Screw the Blizzard downloader—get the latest *WOW* patches directly from FileFront.

WARCRAFT III: THE FROZEN THRONE V1.21A (PATCH)

Meet Azeroth's greatest heroes and villains before they were swallowed up by *World of Warcraft*. Keep up to date with the v1.21a patch.

TRADEWINDS 2 (DEMO)

Buy low, sell high, fight pirates, and build your fleet in this high-seas trading game.

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Designing Minds

How today's top players shape tomorrow's Games for Windows accessories

When is a mouse not just a simple pointing device? When it's placed in the hands of any PC gamer—and custom-built by Microsoft Hardware® to deliver the category-leading performance and comfort Games for Windows® users demand.

The critically acclaimed division doesn't just design products this way because of its ethos or ongoing drive to innovate. It does so because it recognizes the simple truth all gamers do: Peripherals are core extensions of any onscreen adventure—and therefore one's own imagination—making them oftentimes as important, if not more so, than the actual games themselves.

Having developed award-winning accessories for the last quarter-century, Microsoft Hardware's been getting to know gaming audiences and working specifically to address these needs.

Credit the outfit's user-research team, whose job it is to get inside players' minds and spot developing trends before they blossom. The group's most poignant discovery, painstakingly gleaned over the past few decades: Unlike traditional peripheral buyers, gamers are much more in tune with their hardware—and more enthusiastic and opinionated about it.

Why? Consider something as simple as your mouse's scroll wheel. Everyday users simply utilize the tool to quickly parse through documents or spreadsheets. Conversely, players of first-person shooters view the device as a matter of life and death, relying on its tactile feedback when changing weapons midmission.

"Games are constantly getting more complex and varied," explains Kevin Flick, user researcher for Microsoft Hardware. "That's why we go straight to the source—gamers themselves—to explain how they relate to them."

No surprise, either—the feedback speaks volumes. "Most players don't want something new," Flick explains. "They like their old, busted-up keyboard and mouse.

After months of use, these devices have become as familiar as their own limbs—they don't want to mess with that."

The challenge for Microsoft Hardware is how to make new, innovative products for a user community where tradition is celebrated. "It's really a fun dilemma,"

chuckles user researcher Sarah Fuelling. "The way we know we've succeeded at providing products that afford better control and reliability is because, after putting it in their hands, gamers tell us."

Of course, gamers themselves are now as varied as the actual range of Games for Windows titles, with preferences equally split between pros, aficionados, and casual observers.

It's a challenge Microsoft Hardware's happy to meet.

"Die-hard gamers' feedback is imperative—they set the bar for superior gaming devices," Fuelling says.

"But we also temper it with commentary from newcomers, whose opinions are frequently just as insightful."

To address these concerns, Microsoft Hardware offers several innovative gaming solutions, including cutting-edge keyboard Microsoft Reclusa™, laser mouse Microsoft Habu™, and the newly reintroduced, all-purpose IntelliMouse® Explorer 3.0.

"Honesty is crucial when developing gaming products," Fuelling admits, suggesting the team's got no choice but to overachieve. "Gamers can smell a fake a mile away and are tremendously connected: Flops become highly visible, as do successes."

Predictably, the crew wouldn't have it any other way.

"As professionals, we're being pushed hard," Flick explains. "But we're having fun getting to know gamers better—and working our butts off to make the best products possible."



THE OFFICIAL WORD

Get a Grip

Microsoft Hardware takes aim at PC gaming

Just as Windows® gaming continues to explode into the mainstream, so too is the need for high-end gaming peripherals growing alongside it.

Happily, Microsoft® Hardware, the same team behind best-selling accessories like the SideWinder® joysticks, is again focusing on dedicated solutions for gamers.

After all, the right peripheral is an essential part of the Games for Windows experience. It doesn't just directly connect you to the action. It can also mean the difference between sweet victory and ending up as an ugly brown stain adorning some demon-infested space station's wall.

Play It Forward

As always, Windows remains the world's hottest gaming platform, delivering the widest range of content and most advanced software technology.

And now Windows Vista™ raises the bar, offering mind-blowing multimedia experiences for everyone from casual admirers to hardcore devotees. In simple terms, Windows Vista makes it easier, safer, and cooler to play PC games than ever before—plus, naturally, it offers native support for a massive range of first-class gaming controllers.

Every computer owner can upgrade with confidence, knowing the power to change the virtual world is literally in their hands. Microsoft's gaming peripherals provide interactive-entertainment buffs with everything needed to enjoy the ultimate in cutting-edge digital diversions. Better yet, discerning shoppers can trust that these products are custom-designed to meet their needs from day one.



Power Play

Tweak your PC for maximum performance

Experts agree: Games for Windows® is more than just the world's hottest gaming platform. It's also the future of interactive entertainment.

But as much excitement as titles like *Halo® 2*, *Shadowrun™*, *Crysis™*, and *Age of Conan* are generating, it's the unparalleled range of accessories and add-ons for home computers that truly set the PC apart.

"The assortment of Windows-specific gaming products has grown exponentially over the past several years," says Bill Jukes, product marketing manager for gaming devices at Microsoft® Hardware. "With the recent launch of Windows Vista™, we're fully onboard with making category expansion even more of a concern. Frankly, the Games for Windows initiative has generated so much momentum that there's no turning back."

As is, you can already find thousands of peripherals to complement your PC gaming experience, from keyboards to mice to joysticks. However, tremendous year-on-year growth in areas like casual, online, professional, and massively multiplayer gaming currently has manufacturers in a veritable frenzy, meaning that there'll be more great ways to play than ever for you, the end user. Ventures like Microsoft's Live Anywhere initiative, which lets users connect and affect gaming experiences from nearly any place on Earth—desktop systems, set-top boxes, even cellular phones—are only adding to the momentum.

With multimedia convergence drawing ever closer, it's a given that things are going to heat up in the coming months—we're already seeing signs of change. From the availability of wired and wireless controllers that work interchangeably on Xbox 360™ and PC to options for using the console as a Windows Media Center extender, peripherals are quickly taking center stage. Even more importantly, they're also being hand-built to meet gamers' specific needs, emphasizing performance, reliability, responsiveness, and comfort.

Looking at getting the most from your digital diversions? Here's a few recommend purchases that'll help you stay ahead of the game:

System Components—Unlike console systems, which operate using fixed hardware configurations and receive upgrades only once every four or five years, you're free to replace your PC's internal hardware on demand. Videocards, extra memory, faster processors, larger hard drives, and even chips devoted to computing the complex physics behind today's most technically advanced releases may all be quickly swapped in and out for a quick performance boost. With game developers constantly pushing the boundaries of what computers can do, it means you've always got the ability to stay at the forefront of technology—and, what's more, enjoy tomorrow's most eye-opening experiences as their creators fully intended.

Multimedia Add-ons—Of course, you'll want a speedy CD or DVD drive to run all those award-winners such as *Flight Simulator X* and *Company of Heroes®*. Still, why stop there? You haven't lived until you've popped in a 3D soundcard, hooked up a set of 5.1 surround-sound speakers, and listened to raindrops spatter or cannons boom like they were inches away. Home-theater enthusiasts can also double their pleasure with a widescreen or LCD monitor, enjoying fantasy quests or hostage-rescue assignments at authentic high-definition resolution. A good pair of headphones is also a wise investment, especially if the neighbors don't feel like hearing a virtual World War III reenacted every evening.

Input Devices—Like racing games? Imagine peeling out in a Formula One car using a desk-mounted steering wheel and pedals. Prefer tanks or jetfighters? Grab a joystick, yoke, or control panel. Role-playing aficionados and real-time strategy fans can save time and energy with keyboard overlays. First-person shooter buffs also improve their aim and response times with performance keyboards and mice like the Microsoft Recluse™, Microsoft Habu™, and IntelliMouse® Explorer 3.0. Arcade and puzzle enthusiasts can improve their reflexes and score by using a gamepad, too. The upshot is that no matter your game of choice, there's a peripheral to match.

Performance Goods—As with any popular activity, a unique sub-culture has sprung up around computer gaming in which owners are encouraged to show off their individuality through custom PC designs. While you can always buy a candy-painted, tricked-out desktop from specialist online or retail vendors, it's much more fun to personally trick out a system. Multicolored or transparent cases, fans, glowing indicators, professional-grade power supplies, even neon underlighting and accents...the sky's the limit. There's nothing like showing up at a party with your own portable rig complete with its own extreme modifications and, naturally, USB-powered drink cooler.

Online Accessories—Downloading game patches and updates, or going head-to-head with friends in favorite Games for Windows offerings online or off is easy. Just invest in a broadband connection, then pair it with off-the-shelf components like a wireless router, LAN card, and Ethernet cable, depending on your preferred setup and configuration. A webcam will also come in handy if you're planning on checking out the competition, as should a headset with microphone for those looking to do a little trash-talking. Don't forget a printer, either, if you're looking to download and read strategy guides and walkthroughs while away from your PC.

If it all sounds a little overwhelming, take a deep breath. Remember, you're free to stick with what you've got, or upgrade systems over a period of months or years, incorporating fresh peripherals, parts, and enhancements as needed. Microsoft-certified hardware is also guaranteed to be instantly recognized by Windows Vista.

This being the case, there's nothing stopping you from building the system of your dreams and continuing to tinker with it as Windows Vista and the Games for Windows platform evolve. Besides, the team at Microsoft Hardware will be there the whole time, continuing to support gamers with a slew of new conceptual and industrial design innovations specifically dedicated to the enhancement of interactive outings.

"We've got tons of experience doing this and are looking at the entire range of the gaming spectrum, from casual to pro," Jukes says. "With gaming currently the second most popular of all activities on the PC, it's safe to say designing hardware that addresses fans' passion for the pastime is, to be blunt, a huge priority."



At GFW, we want to know what you think.

While we're pleased with all the great letters we've received since our first issue, we want to know **MORE** – about you, your PC gaming life, and how you feel about [Games for Windows: The Official Magazine](#). We value honest feedback, because it identifies areas for improvement and helps us provide you with a better experience.

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Complete the brief survey and you will get a chance to **win a sweet 80GB video iPod* (\$350 value)**. We will double your chances to win if you are one of the first 300 people to complete the survey! We are looking forward to hearing from you.



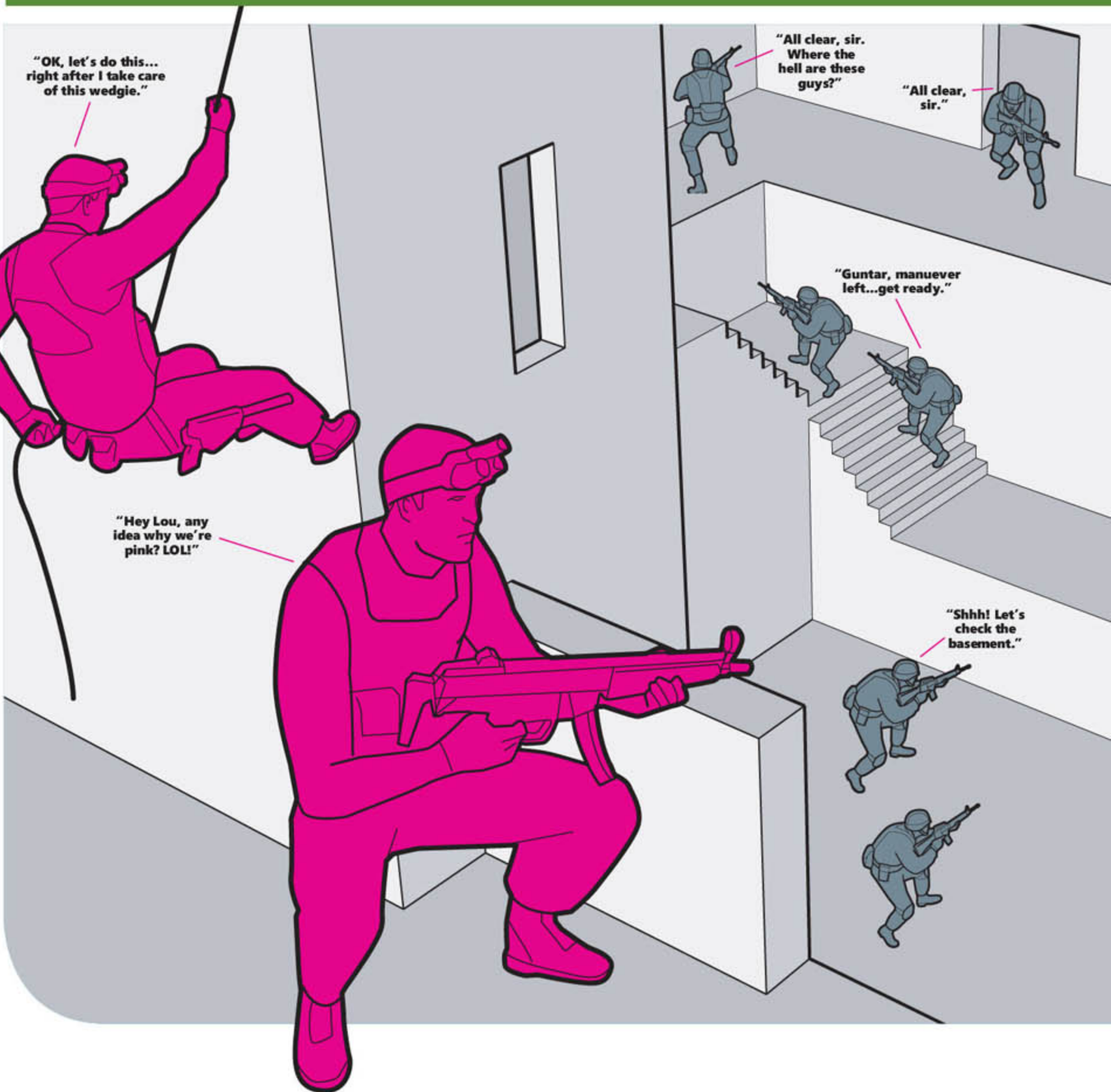
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Tech

Welcome to the world of tomorrow!



FIVE BY FIVE

Five technologies that could change gaming



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REVIEW

The Wire

Microsoft's gone wireless, letting you use Xbox 360 controllers on a PC. Should you?

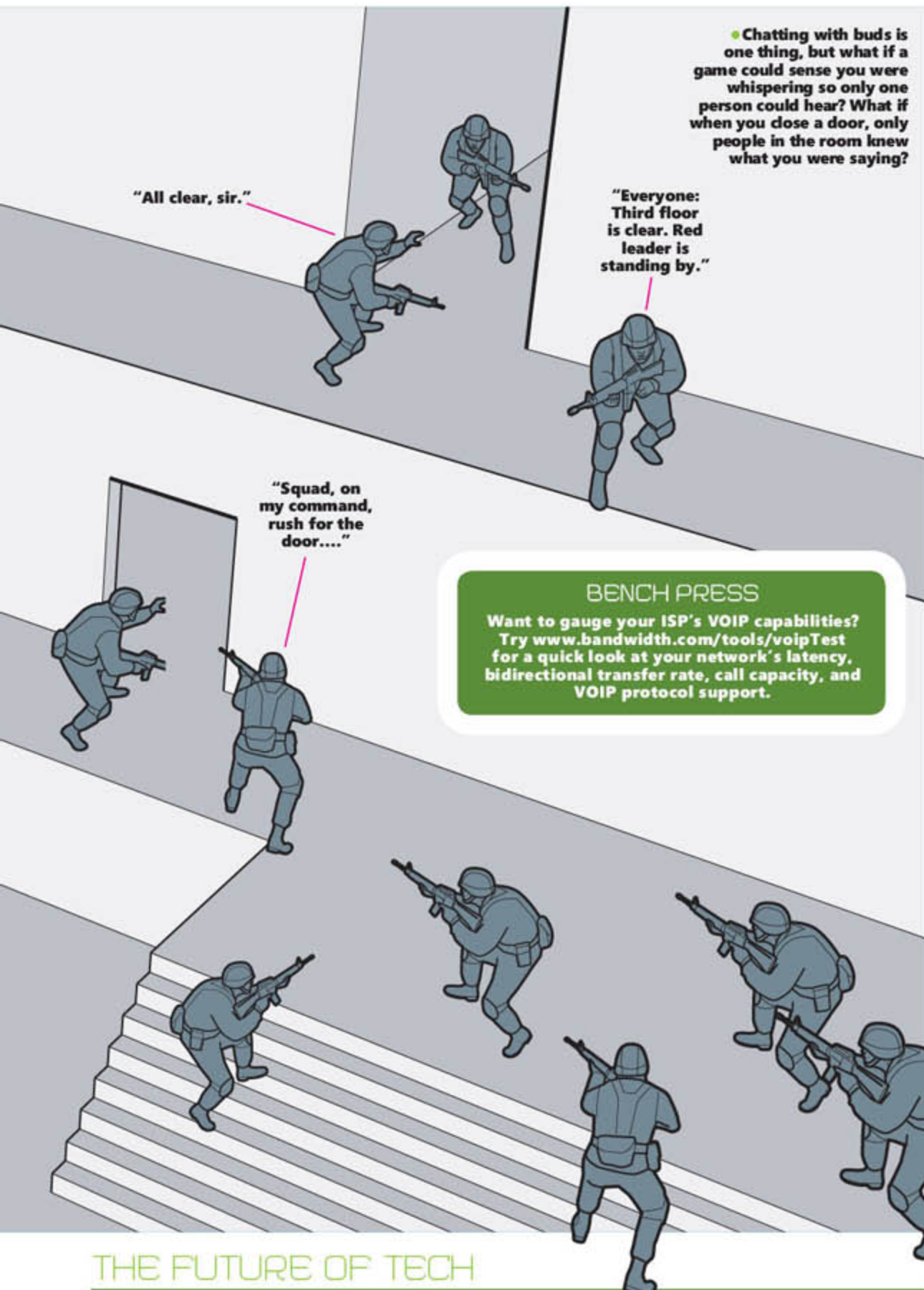


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HARD NEWS

CES 2007

What do Windows Vista, Intel's Core 2 Quad, and Elvis have in common?



• Chatting with buds is one thing, but what if a game could sense you were whispering so only one person could hear? What if when you close a door, only people in the room knew what you were saying?

"All clear, sir."

"Everyone:
Third floor
is clear. Red
leader is
standing by.""Squad, on
my command,
rush for the
door...."

BENCH PRESS

Want to gauge your ISP's VOIP capabilities? Try www.bandwidth.com/tools/voipTest for a quick look at your network's latency, bidirectional transfer rate, call capacity, and VOIP protocol support.

1 CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?

Let's talk *talk*. Shooting the bull with friends on a PC's been an option for years, from Roger Wilco's days of crackly audio yore to newer blood like Skype, Ventrilo, Xfire, and TeamSpeak. The underlying tech these guys employ to ferry your idiosyncratic yaps is called voice-over-IP, or simply VOIP, which is pretty much exactly what it sounds like—analogue sound waves digitally converted, compressed, then routed over the Internet using the medium's connection-oriented conventions.

Unfortunately, PC audio still gets shafted. Even with a fat broadband connection, hefty hardware, and ideal audio settings, chances are you're still enduring an overabundance of sound drops, distortion, echo-back latency, background noise, and feedback while politely instructing the nearby griever as to where he can duct-tape, oil, and ram his mouse. Even on those rare clear-audio days, think of all the busywork involved in just getting teams to coordinate, not to mention less-than-full-duplex (two-way simultaneous) squawk sessions that can lead to gnarly crosstalk chaos.

According to Interact Lab, a research arm of Sussex University in the U.K., the social networking potential of enhancing VOIP technology looks promising enough that it's compelling publishers to rethink formerly "voice-apéritif" games as increasingly "social-first" software. The challenge, according to Interact, is battling slim VOIP-layer architecture, which today yields crappy-sounding audio that can make it difficult to differentiate speakers, or makes everyone sound like they're lounging inside your cranium.

Technically, we're seeing the better-than-phone-quality sound in the future, minus all the sound clipping and dropped calls that come with network latency. Of course, better noise-canceling headsets that can neutralize the huffs and puffs of wheezy mouth-breathers wouldn't hurt. With all that comes a world of in-game possibilities.

Cross-platform chatting (PC, console, and someday cell phone conversations) nears as Live Anywhere looks to roll out in 2007.

What about a better use of voice as a function of gameplay? Already, games are intelligently isolating your chatter from other players not within natural speaking distance. There's that moment in *Splinter Cell's* multiplayer when you can sneak up behind prey and only he can hear you whisper before delivering the killing blow.

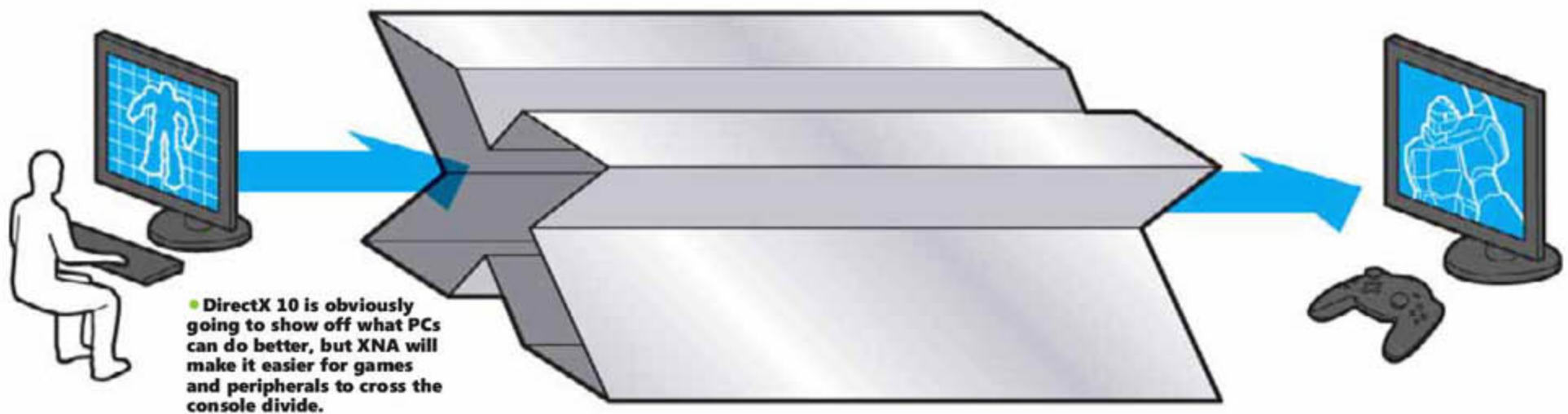
Vivox, a voice-software company, is taking talking a step further. Imagine an MMO or a first-person shooter with a spying skill/class. A low-level spy can make out the conversation of nearby enemy transmissions, but the voice is garbled and full of static. Maybe you can only make out things in a foreign language. Hone that skill and you can decode and understand enemy transmissions.

Just don't think that you'll see an effective use of in-game voice commands. That application, despite years of various console and PC efforts, remains a few generations off. >

THE FUTURE OF TECH

A lot can happen in five years. Today's tech becomes tomorrow's trash within nanoseconds—and here at *Games for Windows* we're nothing if not cheerleaders for the relentless march of progress. At the risk of excessive navel-gazing, we wonder what will have the most impact on computer gaming in the near future. So, with that in mind, we explore the tools, trends, and outright blasphemous temptations (see No. 5) that could impact tomorrow's gamer.

Don't care for top-of-any-kind lists? Don't worry, neither do we. Instead, we've steeped our bionic brain stems in vats of blue squelchy Magic 8 Ball goop to gin up this list of five key game-related technologies. • Matt Peckham (with additional reporting by Darren Gladstone)



• DirectX 10 is obviously going to show off what PCs can do better, but XNA will make it easier for games and peripherals to cross the console divide.

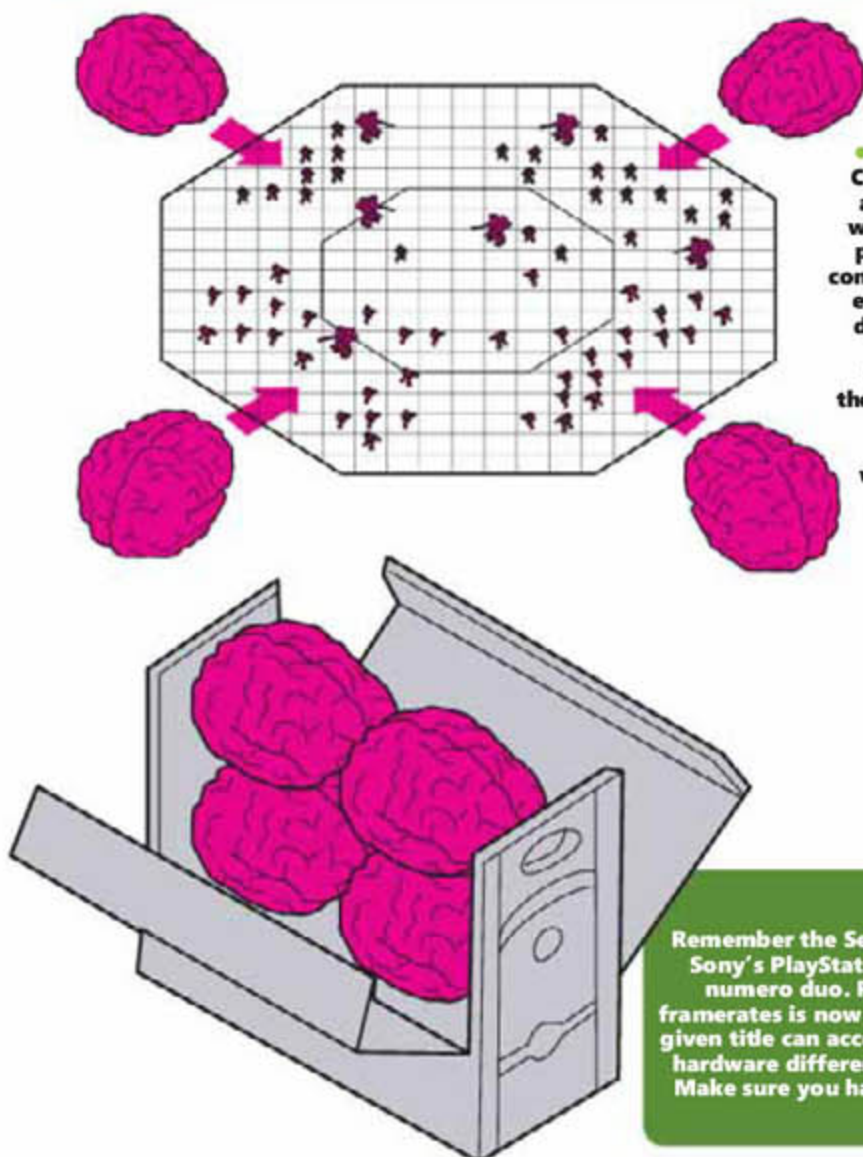
2 X MARKS THE SPOT

My, how far we've come from John Carmack's 2001 crack "Direct3D is a horribly broken API...it inflicts great pain and suffering on the programmers using it," to his recent thoughts on DirectX 10, which he calls "really quite a good API." Did we really need Vista to implement Microsoft's latest game API suite? Nope. Could Microsoft have made it work in Windows XP? Yep. Is it nonetheless the most important overhaul of the DirectX architecture in years that'll send gamers sprinting for a copy of Vista by the end of 2007? Almost unquestionably.

Don't look for singular features to blow your brainpan this time, but instead think of DX10 as a love letter to game developers that's like the cake supporting the frosting, improving everything from where game-related processing occurs (better isolated from the kernel to reduce driver-instigated crashes) to eradicating punitive bottlenecks between the CPU and GPU. Microsoft claims DirectX 10 alone will be able to display graphics up to eight times faster than DirectX 9.0c. (Yeah, all right, show us the money, fellas...) There's no need to nab a DX10-compliant card yet, but by this time next year, it'll probably be mandatory.

XNA (which stands for "XNA's Not Acronymed," i.e., Microsoft's bid to sound hip), on the other hand, is arguably the more exciting product, a suite of tools Microsoft describes as "a new ecosystem of interchangeable, interoperable software tools and technologies." Translation? One-stop homebrew tool shop. Make games that can be played in multiple environments and create hardware that can work across platforms (an Xbox 360's gamepad does work on a PC now, after all).

Consider entry-level pajama-programmer gurus out to cook up the next *Geneforge* or *DEFCON*. Microsoft just released its "Game Studio Express," an XNA subset aimed at hobbyist developers and completely free to download along with Microsoft Visual C# Express Edition, which, if you want to use XNA, just became your new favorite programming language. To help you get started, Game Studio Express even includes prefab starter kits to get beginners rolling in a few elementary genres. And where you'll have to pay an annual fee of \$99 to compile code for your Xbox 360 (or share that code with others), PC development plus binary distribution of your fledgling magnum opus is free.



• Start shoving more CPUs under the hood and suddenly you're waking up a lot more potential inside your computer. The obvious effect is that you can direct better A.I. and larger numbers of troops—but what if they could also handle physics and audio, making it so you wouldn't need extra expansion cards?

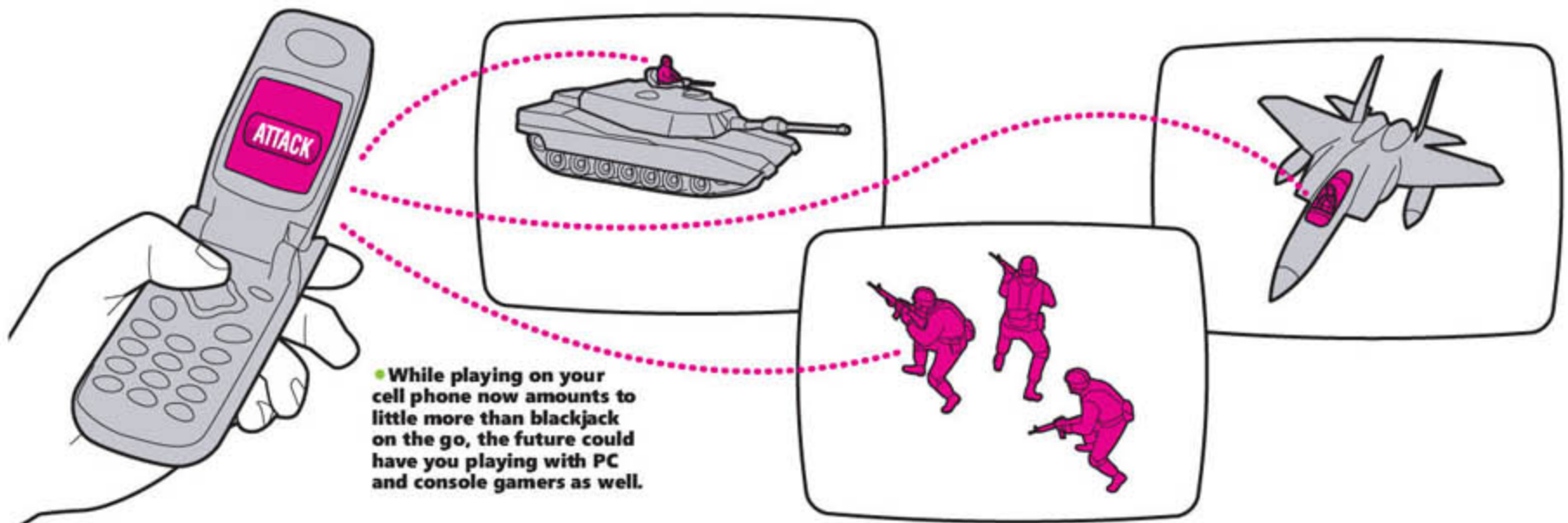
3 IF I ONLY HAD 10 BRAINS

Soundcards, graphics cards, and now physics cards—all born from a need to offload game-related CPU chores. But what if a CPU could do it all? Y'know, audio, video...toaster oven, back scratcher? While the day of the all-in-one CPU eludes us, PC game hardware continues to embrace multiplex processing. Dual- and quad-core CPUs, riser-stacked two- or four-way GPUs, dedicated physics cards...the future looks clustered any way you cut it. And with power bleeders like *Crysis* and *Alan Wake* on the horizon, quad-core CPUs may be overkill today, but the shift to tangible four-or-more benefits is already in sight.

For the moment, multicore game perks remain primarily performance-driven. Step up from a single- to a dual-core CPU and you'll get that welcome 10 to 20 percent performance boost in *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* or *World of Warcraft*, but already prominent coders such as Gabe Newell, the founder and managing director of Valve Software, are championing the leapfrog over dual core in favor of quad, where the performance pops. Beyond that, the future of high-return parallel computing is dedicated modular distribution. A.I., physics, audio, process queuing terrain generation, streaming/decompressing optical drive data to minimize pausing—just a few of the most elementary things the next generation of PC games will be offloading to forge better virtual worlds.

BOTTLENECHED

Remember the Sega Saturn? Dual Hitachi SH2 processors were easily more muscular on paper than Sony's PlayStation, and yet Sega ate dirt because designers couldn't eke much out of processor numero duo. Parallel computing has certainly advanced in the last decade, but pimping your framerate is now more than ever a matter of understanding each game's bottlenecks and whether a given title can access the three idling brains in your new quad-core baby. Every game tickles your PC hardware differently, and just because two games run slowly doesn't mean the logjam's the same. Make sure you have a sense for where each game's bound (CPU, GPU) to avoid running your V8 in only first or second gear.



• While playing on your cell phone now amounts to little more than blackjack on the go, the future could have you playing with PC and console gamers as well.

4 TRANSMEDIA

You're standing in line for movie tickets, when suddenly the guy beside you—intermittently glancing at and chatting on his cell phone—blurts, "Two approaching, four o'clock, power levels critical, over." Huh? Turns out he's running global radar scans for a squad of short-range mechs piloted by friends parked in front of PCs literally around the world. He's vocally feeding his teammates tactical information synchronized and transmitted by satellite to his phone screen.

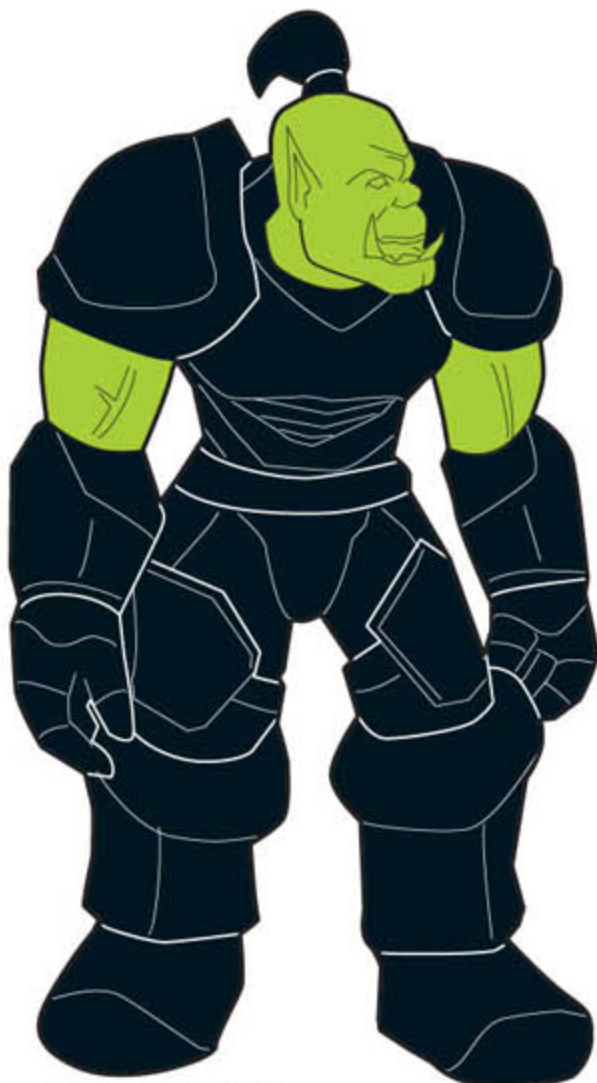
The potential of "transmedia," aside from being another catchword that's like fingernails raking across a blackboard, is the power to bring gamers on different devices together while speaking to each unique platform's strengths. Microsoft threw its hat in the transmedia ring with the announcement of Live Anywhere in 2006. It already has prime examples of connecting players, whether it's console-PC grudge matches in *Shadowrun* or a more connected experience. An example of the latter: racing on a 360 in the morning, buying new car parts via cell during the morning commute, then putting together a custom

paint job on your PC. But what are PC gamers expected to pay for this constant connectivity?

As of 2005, Nokia and Activate Interactive began exploring the use of multiple windows into an MMO world—played via PCs and mobile phones. *HinterWars: The Aterian Invasion* is billed as a "Mobile Massively Multiplayer Online Game," or 3MOG. It allows real-time play with tens of thousands of gamers using either a Nokia N-Gage phone or PC, and while it's not much to look at visually, it's just the beginning.

Developers like Activate envision 3MOGs as expanding player communities and enhancing the sense of world persistency by blurring the line between when and where you game. Naturally, first-gen examples like *HinterWars* or Activate's PC-to-mobile parlor-game pack *Atomic Games* seem relatively tame, but it doesn't take much imagination to visualize where new phones with mobile GPUs from Nvidia or ATI that enable powerful 3D apps are eventually going.

We may not be getting *World of Warcraft Mobile* any time soon, but bet your bottom dollar Blizzard and friends are taking notes and paying very close attention.



• Hi, I'm a PC...glurg!

5 MAC DADDY

OK, OK, we're a PC gaming mag and don't think for a second we'd trade our souped-up custom monster rigs for pretty menus and zoomy graphics, but you have to admit, the era of swearing off Macs as pricey, artsy-fartsy time wasters is pretty much over. No, Macs still don't beat similarly priced PCs in game benchmarks, but then again, you can't run OS X on a Windows PC.

With Boot Camp providing Apple users unfiltered, uncompromised access to Intel's hardware, Apple's no longer a fringe game platform. Expect to see both Mac desktops and laptops nibble away more market share over the coming year, and to see more of your friends popping up with Macs running this or that PC game. Besides, what better way to freak out a friend than by loading up Windows Vista on a Mac, then watching them attempt to get the trusty ol' Apple single-button mouse to dish up a right-click?

What's more, by using elementary "chain loading" technology, it's even possible to turn your WinMac into a Lindowstosh (i.e., Linux meets Boot Camp), and hello supercomputing Swiss Army knife. Rabid speculation is that Apple will eventually integrate Boot Camp into OS X proper, rendering disruptive hard reboots to access either OS obsolete and making it a snap to swing from surfing, designing, or working under OS X over to fragging aliens or lassoing and deploying robot squadrons via Windows courtesy of DirectX's superior API suite. Imagine 3D-screen-rotating between native instances of OS X and Windows at the speedy drop of a button-click and you have a sense of where things could go.

If you could have two Apples for just about the price of one (you'll obviously still need to purchase a copy of Windows) at performance parity with mainstream PC gaming hardware, the real question you'll have to answer is, why *wouldn't* you pick up a Mac? •



• And I'm a Mac! Wheel!

THE WIRE

Microsoft's cutting the cord on game peripherals—but should you?

REVIEWS

Microsoft's Wireless Gaming Receiver for Windows is a little white nubbin of a USB plug that finally lets penny-pinching PC gamers do what they've been clamoring for over a year now: hook up Xbox 360 wireless gaming peripherals for use with a PC. It works as advertised, but the big question is if it's worth the 20 bones Microsoft is charging. There are a couple ways to answer that.

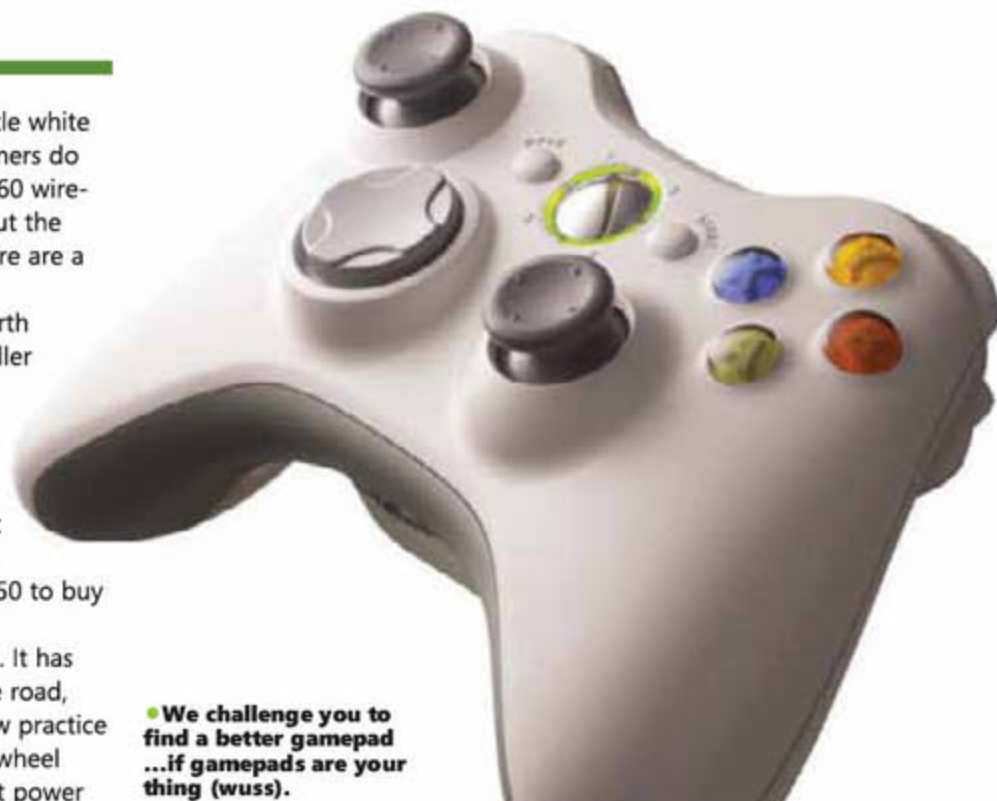
First hurdle: owning an Xbox 360 to make this little endeavor worth your while. If so, then you already have a wireless Xbox 360 controller floating around the house somewhere. From there, all it takes is a quick button-press and your controller has a new mate—the PC. We've said it before and we'll say it again: The Xbox 360 controller is a great gamepad. Perfectly balanced, rocking force feedback, and easy on the hands, the controller sells itself. The fact that it works fully (force feedback and all) on both a PC and console is even better. If you don't own a 360, then you'll need to pony up \$50 to buy this controller separately—but it's a great investment.

Next, in rolls the less impressive Xbox 360 Wireless Racing Wheel. It has those showroom-floor good looks, but when virtual rubber hits the road, this wheel is stuck somewhere between first and second gear. A few practice laps in *GTR 2*, and we were ready to haul ass back to the pits. The wheel works—change gears, steer, drift—but it just feels like someone cut power to the motors. The force feedback motors, that is. As opposed to *Forza Motorsport 2* tests in the 360 fast lane, the PC handled as if driving a rusty Yugo in the carpool lane. Lacking proper wheel tension, you're robbed of half the experience. Granted, it's not like you're holding a tennis racket in front of the computer and saying "Vroom!" but still, c'mon.

In all fairness, MS spokespeople did warn that there aren't many PC games supporting the Xbox 360 wheel yet. Without proper in-game driver support, it just feels like a generic wheel. Maybe better support will come in time, but not soon enough for me. Serious wheelmen will likely steer toward Logitech's G25. It may be wired and cost twice as much as Microsoft's \$150 kit, but the G25 is the finest set of wheels around.

One final wireless product remains impossible to recommend—the Xbox 360 Wireless Headset. Many console players are extolling the virtues of how well this works over Xbox Live—and that may be—but here in PC-land, we are not pleased. Granted, the initial turnoff stems from looking like a Bluetooth-headsetted cellular douchebag when snapping the piece over your ear. The bigger problem is that the PC sees the earpiece as a full headset. The result: Instead of just the voice chatter going to your headset, the speakers automatically switch off, and *all* the game's audio pipes into a tinny amp that makes everything sound like Kathleen Turner gargling sandpaper before talking into a McDonald's drive-through speaker. It's that bad. The only good thing here is that the attached boom mic works wonders. But nobody needs to drop \$60 on a microphone. Hey, here's a free trick for you MacGyver types: Plug a spare pair of headphones into the mic jack on your PC. It'll instantly turn one of the headphones into a microphone.

Back to the big question. Do you really need the Wireless Gaming Receiver? If you want access to the best gamepad, we say, "Hell, yeah!" Then, of course, there's the draw of owning other peripherals that can pull double duty on PC and console. If only that other gear got good mileage on a PC. Maybe with a major driver overhaul. **• Darren Gladstone**



• We challenge you to find a better gamepad ...if gamepads are your thing (wuss).

PRODUCT: **Wireless Controller** MANUFACTURER: **Microsoft** PRICE: **\$50**



VERDICT

- Buy this and you will not need another gamepad. We can't say it any clearer.
- ❑ No, seriously. If you need a gamepad, get this.

10/10
EXCELLENT
Games for Windows
THE OFFICIAL ENGINE

PRODUCT: **Wireless Headset** MANUFACTURER: **Microsoft** PRICE: **\$60**



VERDICT

- Good construction, solid design, and it neatly tucks onto head.
- ❑ Still better suited to consoles. All sound is piped into the tinny speaker.

2/10
TERRIBLE
Games for Windows
THE OFFICIAL ENGINE

PRODUCT: **Wireless Racing Wheel** MANUFACTURER: **Microsoft** PRICE: **\$150**



VERDICT

- A substantial wireless wheel...
- ❑ ...that lacks proper driver support. The result: The wheel's motors behave slightly goofily.

4/10
BAD
Games for Windows
THE OFFICIAL ENGINE

PRODUCT: **Wireless Gaming Receiver** MANUFACTURER: **Microsoft** PRICE: **\$20**



VERDICT

- It does just what it says.
- ❑ More peripherals need to take better advantage of what the PC can do. Make some better drivers, dammit!

7/10
GOOD
Games for Windows
THE OFFICIAL ENGINE

DO YOU REALLY NEED THE WIRELESS GAMING RECEIVER? ONLY IF YOU WANT ACCESS TO THE BEST DAMN WIRELESS GAMEPAD.

HARD NEWS

The bleeding edge of tech



• Friends, we have seen the future—and it's an Elvis bust that busts out karaoke.

VIVA LAS VEGAS!

INSIGHTS FROM CES

To the untrained eye, this year's Consumer Electronics Show was, like, totally awesome. To the jaded attendee who's been down this road before, it was as if everyone fell asleep in 1995, woke up and said, "Hey, this whole putting a PC in your living room idea is neat! It can work now." Yes, those dreamy days of Gateway's Destination system are gone, but not forgotten—replaced with networking your home and a new operating system. Aside from the ludicrous LCD TVs (120 inches?!?!), everybody was talking about how the PC can realistically handle a gaming workload and a home media server that'll stream out HD video, MP3s, photos, and more. Duh! That's been possible for a while now—we've been doing it at home for years in Windows XP. So what was the relatively big news? Microsoft trumpeted the release of Windows Vista, and Intel dropped the quad-core hammer upon showgoers (they call it "Core 2 Quad"). Not since the launch of Windows 95 has there been such a perfect storm of new hardware and software playing off each other—and the gaming possibilities blow the mind. Problem is, this wasn't so much news as stuff that we've been expecting for months. We wish that more hardware vendors were ready to show off the benefits of the new OS. On the bright side, there was no shortage of goofy gadgets (as if that'll ever change).

So, summing up CES 2007 in haiku form:
*Big-ass TV sets
 Quad core and Vista—the hype
 Robot Elvis bust*

VISTA SOUNDS OFF

In our early p/review of Windows Vista, we bitched about the removal of the audio hardware abstraction layer. In English: No EAX or even DirectSound3D support in Vista. That means no cool multichannel sound effects on legacy games—even with the mobo audio. WTF? Well, a huge "thank you!" goes out to Creative for actually doing something about it. Although only in beta form at press time, ALchemy (<http://preview.creativelabs.com/alchemy>) patches the problem and allows legacy titles like *F.E.A.R.* to sound as good in Vista as they do in XP.

BLU-RAY OR HD-DVD?

The other big question of CES: Which next-gen disc format will reign supreme? Here's my early pick: Whichever one the porn industry backs. No, seriously. Every major format success started with porn. VHS tapes, DVDs, Internet video streaming—seeing a pattern emerging here? Despite all the posturing done by major manufacturers, there's still no clear winner in the format war—although some were quick to point out that the costs related to Blu-ray disc production are significantly higher than those associated with HD-DVD. In other words, if you see HD-DVD porn on store shelves (not askin' where you shop), start buying stock. •Darren Gladstone



(newbie)



(alpha geek)



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COLUMN

The last time I wrote about being "old" in this magazine was a whopping eight years ago, and yet, inexplicably, not only am I still alive, but I'm still at this job. Apparently, the folks in the Ziff Davis human-resources department never got the memo about firing gaming editors before their arthritis made it functionally impossible for them to hold a gamepad and do their job—which is awesome for me, because now I can just sit here in my office and watch reruns of *Matlock* all day while the youngsters around here do all the real work. And given that work is good for the youth of today—because it builds character and makes for a stronger and healthier America—I'd call this situation a win-win, as well as a rather selfless act of patriotism, and thus is my humble way of helping the War on Terror.

Anyway, the reason I'm bringing this up again is because, while looking at that old column of mine, I realized something rather obvious, which is what I like to do on this page when not making stupid jokes or reliving my glory days: No matter what age we are, we are always, as gamers, constantly dealing with the issue of being "too old" for this hobby of ours. And I don't get it. At all. I didn't get it eight years ago, and I still don't get it now. I mean, yes, as a 45-year-old man with a wife and daughter, I am perfectly aware that at this point in my life there are certain things I should not be doing anymore. For example, I know that I am now too old to:

- 1) Dance at a rave with a pacifier in my mouth.
- 2) Refer to my friends as "my peeps."
- 3) Gather my stuffed animals on my bed and go under the covers and pretend I'm in Middle-earth.

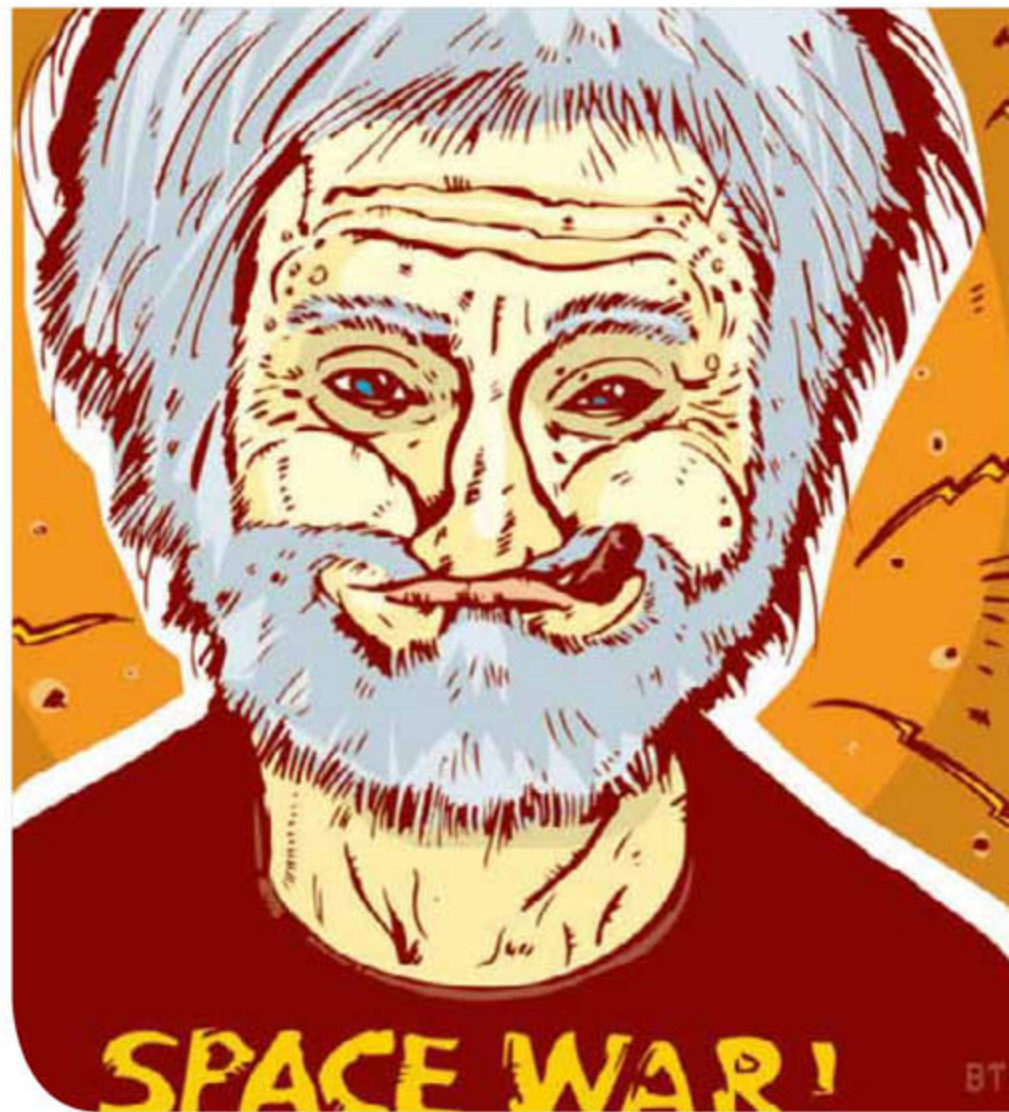
Fine. Great. I can live with this. I may not like it all the time, and sure, sometimes I still do that last one when no one is home, because the backboard of my bed makes an awesome Black Gate of Mordor, and my stuffed rabbit, Shmoopy, really likes being Gollum, but, for the most part, I get it. I need to "act my age." But when it comes to gaming, the notion that there needs to be an age ceiling—that one can be too old to play games—is so obviously wrong and ignorant that even just bringing it up makes me tired. It annoys me on a daily basis that here in 2007, with digital technology and toys and gadgets practically taking over all our lives, I keep finding myself feeling either defensive or embarrassed or sheepish that I "still" play games.

One could first argue, of course, that I should just not care what others think. And for the most part, I don't. That's why I gave up the whole "bathing" things years ago. Oh, I "stink," do I? Oh, I'm "attracting vermin and disease," am I? How bourgeois of you.

But despite my best attempts to not let other people's ill-informed prejudices influence how I feel about myself, they do. One can only be pointed at and laughed at by small children and be chased down city streets by angry stone-throwing mobs like the Elephant Man so many times, just for daring to play a Nintendo DS on the train, before one starts feeling a little put upon.

And, hey, I have it easier than most of you. I have this job to fall back on as an excuse. Should I ever be playing games in public and then find myself in emergency situation, such as a real hot woman being nearby and noticing me, I can immediately switch into damage-control mode.

"Oh, this?" I say, gesturing nonchalantly with the DS. "This is for my job. I'm an editor at a gaming magazine." Then, leaning a little closer, raising my



eyebrows in that suave way of mine, I'll lay down the trump card: "Actually, I'm the editor-in-chief."

"Oh, really?" she'll reply, as she gathers her purse and moves quickly away. "Try bathing."

In any case, I'm tired. I'm tired of explaining to otherwise reasonable-seeming people that just because I have hit a certain age does not mean that I can't spend my evenings pretending I'm a female Blood Elf, arguing with 12-year-olds in the chat channels about whether Warlocks should be nerfed or not. I've earned this kind of quality time.

I do think, in fact, that the ineluctable march of time will naturally fix all of this. At some point in the not-too-distant future, the only people left alive on this planet will be those who grew up playing videogames—and thus, the inherent negative social stigma attached to gaming will naturally fade away. Today's 20-year-old gamers will be old, too, one day, but they won't suffer like me and my fellow first-generation game geezers, because today's nattering nabobs of negativism, the ones who perpetuate the "gaming is for kids" nonsense, will all, thankfully, be dead. Unfortunately, I will be too, which kinda sucks, but at least I can die knowing I helped pave the way. So next time you see me gaming in public?

Know that I'm doing this for you. Appreciate that I'm a trailblazer. And show me some friggin' respect, punks! • **Jeff Green**

Jeff Green

What Jeff doesn't realize is that he was fired eight years ago. He just keeps showing up and we can't get rid of him. Alert the authorities at jeff_green@ziffdavis.com.



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